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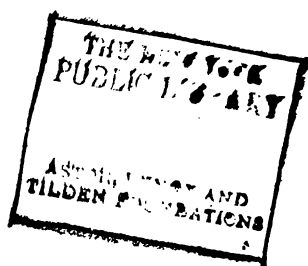


Higginbotham

NCW

JAN OXBER







"A girl . . . that he had not seen since he was a boy."

(Page 38.)

Jan Oxber

[Frontispiece

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Figure 1. The woman

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JAN OXBER

By

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Higginbotham, John C.
"Love in Our Village," etc.

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NEW YORK

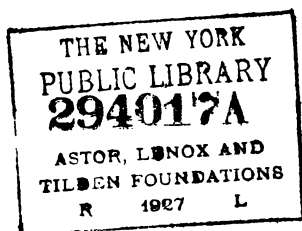
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Jan Oxber

CHAPTER I

TO leave London for Barleigh is like taking a backward leap to the days when our grandfathers were in their prime and our fathers troublesome boys. Railways and telegraphs have transformed the country—Barleigh has not yet reconciled itself to railway travelling, and does not telegraph to its friends. Old Grandf'er Joly finds a melancholy satisfaction in prophesying that the proposed branch line, which will come within three miles of Barleigh, will be the ruination of the place. Like a siren, it will sing to the young men of the fever, and rush, and enchantment of cities, and they will listen and fall ; the daughters will hear, and, unresisting, will be dragged into the whirlpools of iniquity ; they will mate with the heathens of the city and forget the village of their birth ; and nobody but the aged and infirm will be left to carry on the ancient renown of Barleigh as the home of stalwart sons and cleanly, winsome daughters. I have heard

Grandf'er, in Peggin's—the Blue Boar, Zachariah Peggin, proprietor—taking another view, paint in lurid colours the doom of Barleigh if that railway should be brought to their doors. There would be no sleep at nights for any but the soundest sleepers, for the hum of ceaseless traffic would pulsate on the midnight air. Thousands of barbarians from “Lunnon and up along” would flock to Barleigh, as crows to a newly-sown corn-field, bringing with them the wickedness and uncleanness of cities. Houses would have to be built for the invaders on the glebe, on Wenton's land and Grantumen's croft, and even their gardens would be delivered into the builder's hands. Then they would soon set up trams in the streets, and the mortality among the grandf'ers and grandm'ers would be fearful, to say nothing of the hundreds of “bwoys and maids” that would be cut off in the young and tender blade.

It was simply useless to point out that, granted the line was made—and it has been talked of for eight years to my knowledge—Barleigh would hardly offer such irresistible attractions to the Londoner. I was an alien myself it was suggested in circumlocutory sentences, and it was not to be supposed that I could take an unprejudiced view. This met with cordial approval from most present, and Grandf'er was held to have given a fair, if slightly over-coloured, picture

of what might be expected. Middle-aged men hoped they might not live to see the day when the invader should have taken possession of it, and laid waste its green spaces with bricks and mortar.

It is now ten years ago since I discovered Barleigh. It was a genuine discovery ; no friend had recommended the village, nor had I read of it in guide-books or holiday papers, and I look upon myself as another Columbus. But I have not shared the secret of its locality with any—even my best friends. If I am but a plain writing-body in town, I am a gentleman from “Lunnon” in Barleigh, and on the same plane as squire and parson. All I shall say is, that it is an inland village of Wessex.

Ten years ago my doctor, with brutal directness, gave me the alternatives of London and a cemetery, or a Quiet Elsewhere and life. Choosing the latter, I gave great consideration to Elsewhere, and finally decided on Wessex. I ran through a postal guide, and the name *Barleigh* took my fancy at once. Nothing could have a more rural sound, and I set about getting more information. Barleigh, I found, had hopes of growing in time into seven hundred souls, and got on very well with a railway station nine miles away. Barleigh, obviously, was the Quiet Elsewhere.

It was in the middle of May that I found myself on the platform of Suckton station. I consulted the stationmaster about getting to Barleigh. No doubt I was going on a visit to Squire Deverill, at the Hall, he suggested. That was four miles farther on, and I should have alighted at Pylde, where, doubtless, the carriage had gone to meet me. When I had to tell him that I was a much simpler personage, his deference sunk several degrees, and he curtly told me I could arrange with the carrier, who would leave Suckton at seven the next morning, and I should find the Sportsman's Arms a decent inn for the night.

John Traker, the carrier, was the most uncommunicative man, I should think, that Wessex has produced. He could not, or would not, tell me anything; and after half an hour's attempt at conversation, I gave up and found companionship in my pipe.

Directly we left Suckton we began to ascend a long slope, and the fields disappeared. There was nothing on either hand but an undulating expanse of heath, aflame here and there with the golden blossoms of the gorse, or "vuz" as the peasant prefers to call it. When the slope was over, the road, conforming to the character of the plateau, was a series of little sharp descents and ascents, and looked as if a mountainous sea had suddenly been changed to sand. Here and

there were clumps of firs in their sombre green and their long aisles, devoid of underbrush, in perpetual twilight. Rabbits by the thousand sported everywhere, and did not trouble to scamper from the roadside grass as we passed. If I had not been overawed by the manner of John Traker, I should have loaded my pockets with stones, and been a boy again.

A sharp ascent, a long steep slope, and we had left the plateau and were in Barleigh. The heath had gone ; green fields and woodland were around. The carrier, without a word, stopped at the cross-roads in the centre of the village, motioned me to get down, handed out my baggage, took his fee, and drove off. "Zo merry as a grig" John had been once, I heard later, but he had been crossed in love, and he erected taciturnity as a memorial to it.

Strangers are not seen every day in Barleigh, and several women came to their doors to have a look at me. I asked one if she could tell me where I could find lodgings. She didn't know any one 'cept Mrs. Pointon, she said, who might have two rooms to spare. She pointed out a house a little way up the right-hand road, and I left my luggage with her while I made inquiries. The house I was directed to was better built than the others I passed. It was of brick ; its neighbours were of mud, buttressed here and there

with bricks to keep them upright. A large porch, covered with roses and wistaria, projected into the tiny front garden, and I caught a glimpse of a small farmyard behind it.

Mrs. Pointon opened the door to me. She was a widow, I learnt afterwards, but there was no sign of the widow's weeds in dress or appearance. She was a chubby, rotund woman of middle age, with smiling face and hearty manner; and I found myself hoping that she could accommodate me.

"I be main zorry, zur, but I be avraid you can't lodge here," she said when I had told her what I was in search of. "You'll be wanten a vine sitten-room and bedroom; and though I've got 'em to spare, and they be clean, they bain't grand enough vor 'ee, I can zee, zur."

"You're mistaken, Mrs. Pointon. I am going to lodge with you. I did not come here for grandeur, but cleanliness and comfort. May I see your rooms?"

Mrs. Pointon showed them with manifest pride, in spite of her depreciation of them; and I did not need her repeated assertions as to their cleanliness—that was self-evident. The parlour was furnished and adorned after the rural fashion of half a century ago. A wool sampler of a green Noah, a red-and-green ark and a rainbow-coloured dove adorned one wall, and bore the

inscription, "Martha Odell, her work; 1847." The furniture was old-fashioned, but very substantial, and the chairs and sofa were really comfortable.

While my dinner was preparing I took a walk round the farm. There were only one or two cows and a horse, but a great number of ducks and hens and geese were running riot there, and I congratulated myself on my good fortune.

After dinner I took a walk round the village. Barleigh lay on a borderland of sterility and fertility in a depression that seemed to have been made purposely for it. To the south and east lay the hilly country whence I had come that morning, with its wide stretches of heather and gorse. To the north and west lay a fertile country, sloping gently upward from the village.

Barleigh has but one street, if street the straggling, irregularly-built rows of cottages can be called. Half the houses in Barleigh stand among the fields, or lie back hidden from the road, as if they had been built in troublous times, and are reached by tortuous little lanes that are sloughs in wet weather. It is only by standing on Five Barrows, the hill down which I had come that morning, that one can have a good view of the whole village.

There were but three brick-built, slated houses in the village—Mrs. Pointon's, the Blue Boar,

and the smith's house. When, later, I came to know the characteristics of the mud cottages, roofed with thatch that has often the qualities of a sponge, I understood why rheumatism is the peasant's curse.

The church at Barleigh is neither old nor handsome. It stands at the far end of the village, on the road to Plychett. Barleigh is included in the parish of Plychett-Deverill, where the vicarage is. Old men can remember when they had to walk on Sundays to Plychett Church, and there was trouble for all but the bed-ridden who dared to absent themselves.

In two days, if my memory could have kept pace with my landlady's communicativeness, I should have known the names, genealogy, and characteristics of every family in the village ; as it was, it took me several weeks before I could distinguish between persons, or remember their names when they were pointed out to me. And, on the other hand, my landlady, taking kindly to the responsibility of having a gentleman from London in her keeping, confided to the village all she knew about me.

The first afternoon Mrs. Pointon began with her own family history. At supper time she passed on to the history of her neighbours. There was Grantumen, the smith, with four sons and a daughter, whose smithy, embowered in trees,

stood down a side lane. Giles, the shoemaker, was a terrible revolutionary, and "had the most loweren opinions of the vemale sect you did ever hear." The Blue Boar was kept by Peggin, who thought he knew more about pigs than any man. "I wouldn' give a brass varden vor what he do reely know about 'em, zur," said Mrs. Pointon. "I have allus stuck to ut as I should never ha' lost thik gurt sow ov mine iv he hadn' come and said it be a chill she had took in her innards, and I be zaft enough to vollow his advice." There was Farmer Wenton, who had the biggest farm in the neighbourhood, and employed a dozen hands. He was "terble close-visted," and yet his father was worse than he. And so Mrs. Pointon ran through the village. She could give me the character and history of everybody. The fierce light that beats upon a throne is soft and gracious moonlight to the glare in which the villager lives. Nothing is hidden from his neighbours; even his secret thoughts are shrewdly guessed at, and his only consolation is that he knows quite as much of his neighbours' affairs.

I ventured, after a week or two, to go and sit in the evening in the kitchen of the Blue Boar, but greatly to my chagrin my presence sealed the lips of the assembled company. I made myself as agreeable as I could, but while I was present they would talk of nothing but the weather

and the crops. Open as the peasant's life is, he shuts himself up as a sensitive plant before the stranger, and it is only by long patience and sympathy that one can come on the real man. There are skilled investigators who, after a week's flight through the villages, will come back to town and write long and beautiful articles to reveal to the world what the peasant is. They can tell he wears a smock-frock, and has a sun-tanned face, but that is about all they know of him. The peasant's heart is not worn on his sleeve.

I thought I knew Barleigh after the first few weeks, but I was mistaken. It was not until I had visited it year after year that the people accepted me as one of themselves, and let me see their wants and aspirations.

It was some weeks later before I made a practice of attending the Blue Boar nightly. Gradually the company thawed, and readily answered the questions I put to them, and told me traditions of the village. It was in the Blue Boar that I heard the history of Barleigh folk for half a century back, and when I recounted what I had heard to Mrs. Pointon, she was always able to supplement it with interesting details. The lives of men and women whose bodies had crumbled to dust in the churchyard were set before me as clearly and minutely as if they had left autobiographies behind. Sarah



"I made a practice of attending the 'Blue Boar' nightly."

Jan Oxber]

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ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

Tuldon's ride, in 1850, after her recreant lover is précised in my note-book ; the famous wrestling match between Grantumen's father and George Billstead, of Frome, has been told me with a great wealth of detail. I have laughed as heartily as any of them at the tragic fate of a noted Barleighan's top-hat, and the mysterious ghostly poachers.

But of the 'stories of bygone times that were told me, none stirred me so much as the story of Jan Oxber. The company who assembled in Peggin's kitchen, and, indeed, adult Barleighans generally, were given to dating events from "Jan Oxber's time." For instance, Man Zam, in speaking of his wonderful journey to Bristol when he was a boy of eight or nine, referred to it as the "year avore Jan Oxber left." Old Fells also, in his reminiscences, told me that he began courting his wife "zame time as Jan Oxber went a-courten."

It was not until I had heard the name mentioned a score of times that I was interested enough to ask who this Jan Oxber might be.

"Who was this Jan Oxber you tell me about?" I asked one evening, when there was a lull in the conversation. "Was he the vicar here?"

"Jan Oxber? Not he, zur ; a plain work-faren man like the rest ov we."

"Then why do you talk so much about him?" I asked. "He was evidently an important man."

"Well, zur," said Old Fells, "in a way, Jan was. He did zome cur'ous and mighty things 'bout thease [this] part one time. He was the vurst man 'bout here, I have heard vrom my vather, as did ever stand up vor his rights to zquire and passon. Volks down in thease part used to be avraid ov offenden zquire and passon, well knowen as they'd only such rights as they give 'em. It zims, since Jan stood up vor his rights as a man, as my vather allus zaid, as things have been diff'rent in zome ways vor we pore labouren volks. A vine talk it made at the time, I mind, and volks zimmered to lift up their heads avterwards, and zquire never zimmered as much to we since. And zo we volks allus had a liken vor en, as our vathers had avore us. I mind Jan well, vor he was only a bit older than me. We had a liken vor en, hadn' we?"

"Yes," said Horam, a quiet, old fellow, with bent back and whitened hair, speaking with an animation that was foreign to him; "he was a man, was Jan, and I vor one allus honoured he. I do often think if he'd lived in Canaan, his name would be in the Bible, like Ehud, and they chaps as delivered Israel. He was a man, was Jan. Zims I can zee en now, strong, and lusty, and

well-favoured, and the merry vace of en, till his trouble came."

The story of Jan Oxber, as I write it, I had from various sources. Old Fells gave me the main facts of it ; Mrs. Pointon assisted me with many details. The story grew upon me as I proceeded, and the more I knew the more I wanted to know, and I found congenial employment in collecting all the information available. Every one who could tell me a word about him I interviewed, and I was privileged to see a diary that greatly assisted me in understanding how Jan Oxber loved and suffered, and what the fruits of his travail were.

Jan Oxber was the son of a village wheelwright, and was brought up to his father's trade. Benjamin Oxber was an unlettered man, but he had acquired a reputation in the district, not only as a skilful wheelwright, but, what he was prouder of, as a capable mechanic, who found no machinery too intricate for him to repair. He loved to tell of his skill in dealing with broken-down machinery, especially of the repairing of the squire's new-fangled steam-engine, the like of which had never been seen in that part of the country before. The engine had only been at work two days when it broke down. After vainly struggling with it for a whole day, they sent for him as a last

resort. In half an hour, though he had never seen its like before, he found out what was wrong and put it to rights, and the squire swore he was as good as any London engineer, and gave him a sovereign. A simple, God-fearing man was Benjamin—a man who read his Bible with difficulty, but followed its precepts heartily and humbly.

He and his wife were over thirty when Jan was born. Jan was their only child, for though a baby-girl followed him two years later, she gave up the struggle for life in less than a week.

Jan was sturdy as a baby, and daring and fearless as a boy. He had the best education Barleigh afforded at that time, and attended the school kept by an old woman, from whom he learnt words of one syllable and acquired a very rudimentary kind of arithmetic and writing. But a love of reading was born in him, and, fond of outdoor life as he was, he read everything that came in his way—the Bible, *Blair's Sermons*, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and a *Gardening Instructor*—to the joy of his father and the secret anxiety of his mother. But, more than all, he acquired a passion for knowledge that never left him. At ten he began to work with his father, and showed such an aptitude for the work that the delighted parent prophesied that he would be the best wright in the county.

When Jan was twenty his father died from a chill he caught while standing bareheaded at a funeral one bleak November day. On Jan devolved the care of his mother, and he set himself manfully to work for her support. The little cottage and the workshop were their own, acquired with the savings of years.

The farmers, at first, were loth to entrust the repairs of their vehicles to Jan. But it was only for a short time ; they soon saw there was no falling off in the workmanship, and thereafter Jan did not lack employment.

Jan was a favourite in the village. The young fellows admired his athletic feats, especially his prowess as a wrestler. To the maidens he was altogether desirable—tall and handsome and strong ; the girl would be fortunate that brought him to her feet, and many tried. But Jan walked warily among the tender pitfalls.

He was a good son to his mother, but he did not altogether please her. Shortly before his father's death he had begun to go twice a week to the night school in Suckton, and Mrs. Oxber could not see what he wanted with so much "book learnen." And to some of the older and more timid villagers Jan was rather awesome. It was told that he had sat at the feet of Billy Vixen, the Suckton watchmaker, who taught the blankest doctrines of equality, and many shook

their heads when Jan expressed some view that showed he was more radical than his teacher, and which was calculated to shatter the framework of society as Barleigh understood it. About a year after his father's death the doctrines he had imbibed bore fruit, and he had the temerity to beard the Rev. Oswald Cranton himself.

Mr. Cranton was a little-featured man of forty-five, and gifted with the peevish temper of a vinegary old maid. He was a bachelor and rich, and he looked upon his parishioners as troublesome, ill-mannered, and disrespectful children, who needed ruling with a strong and unsparing hand. His pastoral calls were not looked forward to with gladness; at every house he had a lecture to deliver for some neglect of duty, and he rarely left smiles behind him.

One afternoon he met Jan and stopped him. "Oxber," he said severely, "I have observed lately that your manner is not at all respectful. You have learnt in your Catechism that it is your duty to order yourself lowly and reverently to all your betters. I have noticed with pain that you fail in your duty in that respect. It is nothing less than a sin, and arises, I am sorry to think, from a froward heart. It is your duty to pray against temptation. Let me see a great improvement in the future."

Jan looked him squarely in the face. "It may

be in the Catechism, but I never zeen it in the Bible," he said, unabashed. "When I zee it there I'll consider 'bout obeyen it."

"You wicked and ignorant fellow," said Cran-ton angrily, "how dare you tell me so! The Catechism is founded on the Bible, and is equally to be obeyed."

"All I know is, passon," said Jan, endeavouring to control himself, "that it do zay a good deal mwore in the New Testymnt 'bout the rights ov the pore and the wrongs the rich do than 'bout betters. I never zeen betters mentioned as I knows on, and the only betters I knows be they that follow the Bible better than me. And I tell 'ee that iv 'ee preached a bit mwore 'bout gentry doen their duty and less 'bout vaults ov we pore volks things might be a lot better."

"Silence, you impious man," stormed the vicar, his face working convulsively with fury. "You are a rude, ill-mannered fellow, and are doing great harm in the village, I know. You have not even the manners to say 'sir' when you address me."

"And do 'ee to me? I be a man with just zo much right to be called 'zur.' And I do zay 'Mr. Cran-ton,' and you do only zay 'Oxber.'"

"You are a rude, impertinent fellow, and a disgrace to the parish," said the vicar as he

moved away. He preached a severe sermon on the following Sunday on the crying evils of irreverence and disrespect, followed it up by lectures in the cottages he visited, and secretly attempted to drive Jan from the parish. The villagers were invited to boycott him, and, daring to do no other, they gave the vicar fair words. But that was all ; their sympathies were with the yokel.

Mrs. Oxber had never enjoyed the best of health. Soon after her marriage she had a bad attack of bronchitis, and it troubled her afresh every winter. She became a fretful, querulous woman, always seeing the workhouse before her husband and herself. Every year, as soon as she was attacked, she called her husband to her bedside, and gave him minute instructions for the funeral. Old Oxber used laughingly to say that he could lay her out and bury her with his own hands, so many times had he been instructed how to proceed. But Mrs. Oxber had not a particle of humour, and looked upon herself as the most cheerful person, considering her trials and adversities, in the village. She was a good wife and mother after her lights, and loved her husband and son with the truest affection. Yet fretfulness was the prevailing note of the home, and both father and son found it hard to keep a bright face and quiet tongue.

After her husband's death her querulousness

was highly aggravated. Jan loved his mother, being able to pierce beneath the crust and see the true heart within. Yet he was sorely tried, and he had a daily struggle to preserve intact his naturally cheerful and serene temper. "Jan was a good bwoy," Mrs. Oxber owned to her neighbours; "she had nothen to complain ov thiky way. But he did have ideas 'bout book-larnen and things as was never meant vor a plain, work-faren man, which his vather never had. And he'd be gotten married, and she would have to end her days in the House; God help her!"

Jan had the sympathies of the more discerning neighbours, though he never mentioned his trials to any one save his mentor, Billy Vixen. "I have no peace of my life," Jan said; "but then she be my own mother, I 'low, and I never zays anythen to her complainen, though she do plague grievous zometimes."

One of Jan's chief failings, in his mother's eyes, was his thirst for knowledge. He still went to the night school, and each time he had to listen to his mother's opinion on the matter.

"Would 'ee rather I spent my evenens down to the Blue Boar, and come hwome tipsy?" he asked sometimes.

"What be it all vor? Bain't 'ee content with beën a wright?"

"Ov course I be content."

"Then what be it vor? Thee pore vather never troubled 'bout book-larnen. He could read his Bible, all 'cept zome ov they big words as de Almighty meant vor passons and gentlevolks, and he were zo good a man as ever married a maid, and well thought ov, was my Ben. Ah dear! when I think that de Almighty zeen vit in His wisdom to take he and leave wuss men!" And she broke into tears.

"There, there, mother! Don't 'ee go vor to question the Almighty's dealens."

"I bain't," said Mrs. Oxber indignantly. "Zims to I as 'ee be doen that a zight mwore than I be with book-larnen and talk 'bout verbses and nouns. Thee pore vather knew nothen 'bout they, and there be nothen 'bout they in the Book."

"But, mother, God meant we all to get zo much knowledge as we'm able."

"Zo He did, I've nothen to zay agen ut. Many's the time I have wished I knowed mwore 'bout Pallystine and the Land ov Canaan and Punchis Pilet and all they places. But that be diffrent to trash 'bout nouns and thik algibber. Thee vather knowed nothen ov they, and he was a good scholar, and died a bootiful Christian death, and everybody in Barleigh would tell 'ee the zame."

Jan argued the question no farther, but sighed

and turned to his "nouns" and his "aligbber" with increased fervour.

Things, however, went harder with Jan when the vicar called on his mother about a week after their meeting. A clergyman, to Mrs. Oxber's view, was semi-divine, and his words were to be treated as oracles. "She vairly trembled when she zeen en comen," she said, "vor she could zee with half an eye that he looked like a roaren lion." It was not an apt simile; anything less like a lion than Mr. Cranton could not be conceived.

Mrs. Oxber made haste to propitiate her ravening pastor. "Good-avternoon, zur," she said, dusting a spotless chair carefully with her apron. "I ha bin wonderen and wonderen, zur, when 'ee would be comen to zee I agen, zur. Zims, zur——"

"And I have been considering whether I should come to see you at all," said the shepherd in his direst manner. "After the insults I have received from your son, I was not sure if it were not my duty to cut you off from the privileges of the Church."

Mrs. Oxber, shaking from head to foot, sank into a chair. "Insults, zur, vrom my bwoy, Jan? Zurely not, zur?"

"But it is so, I tell you. Never have I been so insulted before."

"Oh, zur, 'ee must vorgive en. I'm zure he didn' mean ut," and tears came to aid the pleading.

"I spoke to your son about his want of manners to myself and his betters. Instead of expressing penitence when I reminded him of his duty to his superiors, he impudently told me—*me*, a clergyman and the vicar of this parish—that there was nothing about it in the Bible."

"Oh dear, zur, my Jan, my Jan!" sobbed Mrs. Oxber.

"And he also told me that I did not preach the Gospel; and he refused to address me as 'sir.' He, a common workman, and I, a clergyman! I have never been so insulted in my life. It is a scandal to the parish. Men have been shut up in gaol for less."

Mrs. Oxber sat trembling and sobbing, her face hidden in her apron.

"I am really of the opinion that I ought to forbid you both to come to the Lord's Table, for, of course, a mother is largely responsible for her son's character."

If the vicar had doomed her to instant death it would not have been so terrible to the poor woman as the threatened deprivation, which, she believed, would place her soul in jeopardy. She rose from her chair with a cry of anguished beseeching. "Don't 'ee, zur, oh don't 'ee! I can't

help ut, zur ; I have zpoken to en and told en what it be comen to. Look 'ee, zur, don't 'ee! I be getten a wold woman, and might die at any time, and what would become ov I?"

"Well, Mrs. Oxber," said the vicar, pleased with the effect he had produced, "I wish to be merciful, and as it seems you have remonstrated with him I cannot altogether blame you. But it is your duty to deal sharply with him, and turn him to a proper frame of mind. Unless it is stopped, his evil influence will affect the whole parish. His insolence I will gladly forgive when he comes to me and asks my pardon for his offence. The affair has pained me, really pained me."

"Oh, thank 'ee, zur, thank 'ee," said Mrs. Oxber with heartfelt gratitude, ready to fling herself at his feet. "I have zpoken to en, zur. He haven' been a bad bwoy to I, zur, beggen your pardon. He don't drink, zur, and he do work, just about. But it be the book-larnen, as I've told he many's the time. My pore dear husband, he——"

But the last thing Mr. Cranton wanted was a panegyric on the late Benjamin Oxber, and he did not let her proceed. "There, there, I must go now, my good woman. Speak seriously to him. One black sheep will infect a whole flock, you know." And the vicar left, feeling he had, considering the extreme provocation offered to him by one of the

"lower orders," displayed the meek and forgiving spirit that befits a Christian minister.

The poor, simple soul got down on her knees when the faithful shepherd had gone, and, with groans and tears, prayed for her boy, and afterwards spent the rest of the afternoon crying and rocking herself to and fro in her chair, and wishing herself safe with her husband.

"Whatever be wrang, mother?" said Jan in alarm when he came in. "Be it the bronchitis agen, or be it the rheumatiz?"

"Hear en! Oh, Ben, Ben, I wish I were with thee, that I do!"

"What be wrang, mother? Be 'ee porely, or be somethen troublen 'ee?"

"What be wrang? Thee be wrang. Passon's bin and a'most cursed I. Thee 'sulted he to his face, he zays, well knowen what 'ee did. 'I ought not to allow either ov 'ee to come to the Table,' zays he. But he be merciful, or I might have to die any time in my sins."

A wild oath rose to Jan's lips, but he stifled it. He saw he must soothe her at all costs, for she was like to make herself seriously ill. So he quietly said, "Don't 'ee trouble any more, mother. Iv it'll please 'ee, I'll zee passon the night and make ut up wi' en. Now come, get zome tea, and don't 'ee trouble or you'll be really rough [ill]. I thought to zee 'ee joyful, just about, thease

evenen, vor I've brought 'ee a shawl vrom Suckton."

"Thee bain't a bad zon, Jan, vor all thee head-strong ways; there's zome ov thee vather's ways about 'ee," said Mrs. Oxber, drying her eyes, and beginning to prepare the tea.

To change the current of her thoughts, Jan told her all he had seen and done in Suckton that afternoon, and before the tea was over was rewarded by seeing a smile on her face again. He was grievously troubled and hurt, but he wore a mask before her. After tea he changed his clothes and went to see the vicar.

"Now beg his pardon, Jan, and give en duty, and tell en thee be zorry vor what thee did."

"Never fear, mother," he said cheerfully. "I'll make all right with en."

He dropped the mask on the doorstep, and his face became stern-set and pale. The rectory was three miles away, and he formed his speech as he went along.

One of the lower orders of Barleigh would have never dreamt of going to any but the kitchen-door of the vicarage. Not so Jan; he went boldly up to the front-door, and rang the bell.

"Be the passon in, Lizzie?" he asked of the girl who came to the door, and whom he knew well.

"Ees, he be, Jan. Do 'ee want to zee en particler? He be taken a rest avter dinner, and it puts en out to disturb en."

"Just zay that Jan Oxber be called to zee en. He wants to zee I particler, do 'ee zee?"

Lizzie soon came back with orders to take him into the study.

The vicar had dined well, and he was in his most gracious mood. "Oh, it's you, Oxber. You want to see me? Your mother has been talking to you, I see, and I am glad you have listened to her."

"Yes, passon, I want to zee 'ee, and my mother's bin talken to I," said Jan in measured language, angry fires in his eyes. "I want to know whether you call yourself a man, let aloan a Christian passon, to go and talk to a pore, harmless, God-vearen woman like 'ee did thease avternoon? I comes hwome and vinds she cryen and just about rough avter the way you spoke to her and threatened her. I want a plain answer: be that a man's work?"

The graciousness had gone from the vicar's face. "If I had known the spirit in which you had come you would not have been admitted. I was expecting that you had come to apologise for your insolence, and you have come in a more rebellious and insolent spirit than ever. You talk of your mother's tears: it was sorrow at your evil

conduct that caused them, and I dealt with her in a merciful spirit—a very merciful spirit, considering the character of her son.”

“My mother, passon, believes in passons as the Almighty’s right-hand men, as should comfort the widows and the vatherless, even believes in you, passon, as a man ov thik zort. If she hadn’ she’d have told ’ee to walk out ov the house. And you’ve upset she, just about, all because I zeen nothen in you to zpecially honour. She be a good mother to I, in spite ov zome old-fashioned ways, and I won’t——”

“Leave this house instantly, and never dare to come——”

“Not till I’ve had my zay, passon. You had yours thease avternoon, and to a woman as couldn’ help herself. Now it be my turn. ‘Never dare to come here,’ ye was zayen. I zay, and mark my words well, passon, ‘Never—ye—dare—to come—to our house—agen—till ye can conduct yourself like a man.’ Vor I warn ’ee, passon, that iv ever I vind my mother in thik state agen vrom what ’ee have done to her, I’ll give ’ee the gurtest thrashen man ever had ; aye, iv I be swung vor it the next minute. I’ve altered my mind comen, or—but never mind. And let I tell ’ee too, passon, be careful what ’ee do about stoppen an old woman comen to the Lord’s Table. I be mwore sorrowful than

roused the night ; God help 'ee iv 'ee rouses me ! Good-night to 'ee ;" and Jan walked straight out.

It was a great humiliation for Mr. Cranton ; he had clearly been worsted, and, moreover, Jan's warning carried conviction with it. What he would have done there is no means of knowing. Mrs. Oxber was unable to go to church again on account of her ailments, and Jan only attended when he was sure the vicar would not be present.

"A dangerous young fellow, that Oxber," Mr. Cranton dinned into the ears of his people ; and his people gravely shook their heads in unison with him, but smiled when his back was turned. Jan had acquainted a few of his friends with the episode, and Barleigh, in secret, shook its sides.

Mrs. Oxber waited up in anxiety until Jan came home. "It be all right, mother," he said as soon as he got in. "Passon and I have squared matters, and you'll hear nothen about my sins agen. Passon has a good opinion ov both ov we now."

"Thank the Lord vor that, my bwoy ! It be a ter'ble lwoad off my mind ;" and she went to bed content.

CHAPTER II

FOR a year or two things went on in the same fashion for Jan. The petty worries of his daily life, which arose chiefly from the cross-grain in his mother's character, were harder to bear than the worst blows of misfortune. Mrs. Oxber was gradually failing, and her querulousness increased with her growing feebleness. Grievous as the burden seemed to him, he forced himself to cheerfulness by a continual effort of will, and met all her complaints with a laugh and joking good-humour. But his life had its compensations; he was thrown back on himself, and found an anodyne in books. Billy Vixen lent him several strenuous works on political economy; and, in a small lending library in Suckton, he found the King's Treasury. His troubles were as nothing when he began to hold commerce with the mighty dead—Milton and Shakespeare and Scott. When his mother had gone to bed, and he was free from interruption, he sat for glorious hours wandering in an enchanted world. These midnight hours

with the great awoke in him an intoxicating exaltation of soul, and lifted him into serener air. Books, he afterwards declared, were his salvation, and enabled him to endure to the end in the grim battle that was before him. He looked forward as eagerly to the hours of darkness as a spirit condemned to earth by day would seek its native air by night. By day he was a common workman, by night a king.

He still went on the village green after his day's work was done, and mixed with his fellows. But he was often meditative and absent-minded, and rustic wit declared that he must be in love.

Jan denied it with a laugh, but it was true, although he hardly knew it. At the golden age of twenty-two love found him and wounded him sorely, turning his strength to sweetness.

It was in church that the arrow went home. One afternoon in the early summer a girl came among them that he had not seen since he was a boy. From his high-backed pew he could just see her face, and he felt a thrill of diviner exaltation than even books had given him as he looked at her. He was not given to labelling his emotions, and that it was love he did not know until long afterwards. Had he been asked, he would have said that he had been struck by the pure sweet face, so different from the type of village beauty in its gracious tenderness and

solemnity. She was the daughter of the miller at Tiford, and he had a faint remembrance of her. He had once gone with his father, when he was quite a boy, to the mill, and the girl was feeding the ducks in the mill-yard. The dainty manner in which, child as she was, she lifted her feet and picked her way in the muddy yard had dwelt in his memory. Since then her mother had died, and she had been living with an aunt at Dorchester, and attending a Young Ladies' Seminary, which showed, the Barleigh gossips averred, that Miller Pocock had more money than sense.

That face haunted Jan all the week, and the following Sunday, although the vicar was preaching, he attended church again that he might see her. To his joy she was there. If only he dared speak to her! He tried to think of an excuse to speak to the miller, but none could he invent, and he had to content himself with watching her at a distance. He lingered at the church door until she came out, and heard her speak to a friend in a voice so sweet and clear that on his way home he found himself trying to reproduce its music.

It was weeks before he admitted to himself that he was in love, though already he had imagined Ruth sitting on one side of the tea-table at the mill, and himself on the other; and once an ecstatic thrill coursed through him and set his

blood aflame, as he imagined that his lips had met hers.

But at last he had to acknowledge to himself that he was in love, and his love was hopeless. He had not spoken to her! She was a lady and he was poor, and there were plenty of well-to-do young farmers around who could see her beauty and winsomeness as well as himself. Perhaps she had already been given to some man, and he would soon see her in church as a bride. He bit his lips at the thought till the blood came.

There was no magic in books then for Jan. When he tried to read a sweet face danced on the page, and he had to go outside and dream of her with a pain that was half joy. He began to take long rambles in the direction of Tiford, and once he was courageous enough to walk past the mill, but he never saw anything of her save in church.

The dullest woman can interpret the signs that love stamps upon the face, and Mrs. Oxber, in all that concerned her boy, was not a dull woman. One afternoon as he sat in a reverie at the tea-table, imagining, as usual, that Ruth was sitting opposite to him, he was startled by his mother bursting into tears, and agitatedly rocking herself to and fro.

"Whatever be the matter, mother?" he asked in blank amazement.

She did not answer, but her sobs increased, and she wrung her hands.

"Mother, what is it?" he cried.

"I zeen ut, I zeen ut, vor days and days. I knowed it be zo, though no doubt 'ee think I be a born vooil. When I do go to the House it'll not be vor long; please God, I zhall zoon be vinished."

"Whatever be 'ee talked about, mother? What have upset 'ee? Shall I go vor the doctor? I can't understand it."

"No, thee don't understand," with a sudden access of sarcasm. "I didn' expect thee would. Thinks I be a zaft-head, don't 'ee? Thinks I be a blind old woman as zees nothen, I z'pose. Who be she? Thee bist mortal close and sly with thee pore old mother as brought thee up, and zat up nights and nights with 'ee when thee had the teethen. Thee took good care never to let I zee 'ee out with she, and thee told folks, I guess, to kip it vrom I. When do thee want to wed? vor iv 'ee'll only zay, I'll put my bit things togeder and go the night, iv thee likes. I zeen it all the time."

Jan was so thunder-struck that he blushed mightily, but, happily, his mother did not see his face.

"Do 'ee think I be coorten, then?" he asked, trying to speak lightly.

"Do I think it? Baint I able to zee?"

"Well, then, I tell 'ee, mother, I baint doen anythen ov the zort. I baint coorten; and as I shall have to avore I wed, I guess you've no need to pack up thease wik. There baint a maid about here as wants I, zo don't 'ee trouble."

"Baint ther?" Mrs. Oxber threw down her apron, and her eyes blazed. "Baint ther? They all be runnen avter 'ee, and curlen vingers at 'ee. I've zeen it, iv I do be a vooil."

"There, mother, no more about it," said Jan. "I've told 'ee the truth, and I think it wrong to go on thease way 'bout nothen. You might let I have a bit ov peace."


"He would have plenty of peace when she was gone, which would not be long," she told him, with a fresh outburst of tears; and he left the table and went to the workshop.

He was almost stupefied by his mother's sudden attack. His secret, he feared, that he had imagined locked up in his breast, he must have revealed to all the world, and he was almost afraid of conjuring up Ruth's image in his mind, lest his mother should have power to read his inmost thought.

He began to go about his work listlessly, and brooded much over his tragic fate. If he only had five hundred pounds he would put his fate

to the touch ; but he might as well have dreamt of five millions.

As the days went by he became more miserable, until he was afraid he was losing his manhood and becoming one of the whining, flabby creatures who are ever railing at fortune. He determined to conquer himself, and one evening he went out for a long ramble, and, in the Park wood, fought against himself in a bitter struggle. He rose and determined to be a man and accept his fate. She was not for him, and he must, at all costs, banish her image from his mind. He went home and tried to find the old magic in Shakespeare, until there came in the east the first tremulous flush of dawn, and the daily miracle of a rising sun awoke the earth to beauty. But a heart sick of love can find no magic anywhere save in the loved one's eyes, and Shakespeare was a burden and Scott foolishness. Tired and unrefreshed, he went to the door and looked over the landscape. A fleecy mist filled the hollows, and everything seemed chill and dreary and commonplace to him. He smiled bitterly to think that a woman's smile would make that same cheerless aspect the glorious realm of fairyland, and his cottage a palace. "I be a vooil!" he said, and turned to his workshop. He had an iron will, and for two long days he schooled himself as with scorpions ; and still he saw Ruth in



every sunbeam, and heard her voice in the black-bird's note.

The gods laugh at times and play tricks with mortals in grim humour, as if to show how vain are their best endeavours. And in the midst of his heroic endeavour, Jan was made the play-thing of fortune. On the third morning of his martyrdom a trap stopped outside the door, and a pert youngster of about fourteen leaned out of it and lashed the window with his whip, to call the attention of the inmates.

Jan went to the door. "Be 'ee Jan Oxber?" said Sir Malapert, with lordly condescension.

"I be."

"Then you come along ov I to Tiford, and look your very slippiest, 'zno.¹ Mr. Pocock, down to the mill, wants 'ee at once, and I be come to drive 'ee straight back. Zo get zome tools, my man, and don't keep I waiten."

Jan's heart leapt as he tried to comprehend his good fortune.

"Where to?" he asked.

"I told 'ee once. To Mr. Pocock's, down to Tiford."

"What do 'ee want me vor?"

The boy looked at him with lofty contempt for his obtuseness. "I dunno as it be much good to

¹ Contraction of "Dost thou know?"

tell 'ee," he said ; "but the fac' be, the wheel be gone wrong, and Mr. Pocock thought he'd let 'ee try to right ut. Iv you be comen with I, look alive, 'zno. The mare wants to be off, and I have a lot to do thease marnen. We can't be waiten all day. Iv you thinks it be beyond 'ee, I'll drive on to Suckton."

Jan said nothing to Master Noah Begg's cheekiness—in fact, he did not notice it—but went at once to get his tools. As they drove off, Noah condescended to explain that the water-wheel had broken down, and the miller, who prided himself on his mechanical skill, had tried to repair it, with the result that it was now completely immovable. The miller's temper had also suffered considerable damage, Noah added. When at last he had to own that it was beyond his skill, he sent Noah for Jan, with the promise that he should have his jacket dusted if he was not back in less than an hour.

Jan never forgot that ride. The boy chatted all the way, but Jan did not heed him—he was soon to see Ruth. A heavy rain had fallen during the night, after a month's drought. The earth sent forth a pleasant odour, and it seemed to Jan that the leaves were rustling in mirth and gladness. His heart was glad, and it was well that Nature should rejoice with him.

Tiford Mill is one of the prettiest spots in the

neighbourhood of Barleigh. It stands in a cup about fifty yards in diameter, a little below the road. On three sides it is surrounded by a wood, out of which tumbles, with a noisy clatter, the brook that turns the wheel. The mill-pond lies between the mill and miller's house. The house itself is old and of reddest brick, with a warm-coloured tile roof, and has figured on the canvases of great artists. Fair as it seemed to Jan as they drove into the yard, it was nothing but a background for the maiden who stood in the doorway, at the sight of whom his heart leapt.

The miller was a little man whose person bore evidence of good living and a contented mind. He took life as lightly as a sparrow, and was always ready to burst into laughter or crack a joke about nothing in particular. "But thik danged wheel had put him out," and his brow was wrinkled as he came down the yard to meet them.

"Well, Jan, how be'ee? Glad 'ee be come, my bwoy. Do'ee think thease job ov mine will be beyond 'ee?"

"I'll zee what I can do, Mr. Pocock. I can tell better when I zee it."

"Come thease way, then."

Jan examined the wheel carefully and soon saw what was wrong. With a great effort he could have it at work again by night-fall. But now that fate had been kind to him he meant to make

the most of his opportunity, even at the risk of losing a little professional reputation.

"I can do ut vor 'ee, Mr. Pocock," he said, "that I be zure about ; but it'll take me well into the morrow to make a job ov ut."

"Well, then, 'zno, Jan, thee can begin straight away. Look 'ee now, thee'll zleep here the night zo as to be ready to begin vurst thing in the marnen, and p'r'aps 'ee wouldn' mind putten in a little extry time the night."

"Oh, but, Mr. Pocock, mother will drive herself mad if I baint to hwome by night-fall. She'll be here seeken me."

"Look, zee now, Jan, no words ! Noah, just 'ee drive down to Barleigh agen and tell Mrs. Oxber as Jan can't be to hwome the night. Quick, 'zno. But do 'ee want any mwore tools vrom hwome, Jan, zo as Noah can bring 'em with en ?"

Jan instructed Noah what to tell his mother, and began to take off his jacket, when the miller stopped him.

"Zee now, Jan," said he, "a mouthful ov bread and cheese and a drap ov ale allus be the best way to begin to my thinken, and we'll start thik way. Come thease way."

The miller took him across to the house and into the comfortably-furnished living-room and then called for Ruth.

"Yes, father, what is it?" Jan trembled as she came to the door.

"Get we zome lunch, my dear. Do 'ee know Jan here?"

"No, father, though I think I have seen him before," Ruth said with a smile.

"He be Jan Oxber, down to Barleigh. A ter'ble yellow vor the maids he be."

Ruth smiled again, and Jan was conscious that he was making a poor figure as she gave him her hand and asked him how he was with a perfect self-possession that somehow depressed him. It seemed as if he were almost a nonentity to her.

After lunch the miller took him to see the wheel, and he had to listen to an elaborate account of what was wrong, of what had been done to set it right, and what he was to do himself. He saw that the miller understood little about it, but he listened patiently and said nothing: the speaker was Ruth's father and semi-divine. When he had ended his instructions, to Jan's great relief he went away, and Jan went down among the machinery, and had worked on steadily for an hour when he was suddenly conscious of some one standing above him. He looked up and in the half-light saw Ruth. He was glad then that it was gloomy.

"How are you getting on, Mr. Oxber?" she asked when he looked up.

"Quite well, thank you—that is to say, pretty moderate," Jan answered in great confusion

"Have you found out what is wrong?"

"I believe zo, Miss Pocock."

"What is it? if you don't mind telling me."

"It be thik here bolten-pin that got broke and then the end ov it got twisted with the cogs ov thease wheel and jammed the little wheel tight agen the gurt un. It be hard to explain, but I could show 'ee in a minit."

Ruth laughed. "But father insisted it was something quite different, didn't he?"

Jan looked up to see whether candour or equivocation would be wiser. He took heart from the twinkling eyes, and said with a smile, "Well, he did zay as how he did think it was the bracket that shifted and jammed it."

"I hope you didn't contradict him."

"No, miss; I thought it best to agree with en."

"Well done, Mr. Oxber," laughing again; "you have the making of a courtier in you. It is always best to agree with some people, and then do things in your own way. Isn't it very dark down there?"

"Well, it be a trifle gloomish."

"I'll get a candle," and she went off and presently returned with one. "If you'll show me where to stand, Mr. Oxber," she said, "I'll hold it for you a little while."

"You be very good," he murmured, wondering whether Paradise could be any sweeter than that dusty, grimy pit in which he was working.

Ruth began to talk, and in a short time he found himself chatting without embarrassment of Barleigh and Tiford ; and he was delighted to find that Ruth agreed with him about the wretched quality of the singing of Plychett Church Choir. She told him how dull and tedious the service seemed to her after the beautiful service in the parish church at Dorchester. And Mr. Cranton's sermons! how tiresome they were! Jan said nothing when the vicar's name was mentioned.

"I don't like Cranton," Ruth went on. "His sermons either irritate me or send me to sleep, and he does not think any one in the parish is good enough for him to associate with except the squire and the Peltons at Odstow. I believe he is only perfectly happy when he is asked to dinner at the hall and goes in the squire's carriage. But I hadn't better say more ; perhaps you like him, Mr. Oxber."

"That I don't," said Jan with emphasis. "To tell 'ee the truth, Miss Pocock, I hate en."

"Oh, I am so glad. That's another on my side. Everybody here seems afraid to say a word against him, though I know they dislike him."

"It be the zame at Barleigh," said Jan. "But

I had to tell en what I thought ov en a year or two agone."

"You did, Mr. Oxber? Well done! Do tell me about it, please."

"Iv I might make so bold, Miss Pocock, without vexen 'ee, p'r'aps you wouldn' mind waiten till I leave off work. It be a longish tale, and I can't work vurst-rate and tell a long tale. And I don't care to do all the talken myself."

"Well, then, it's a promise. You shall tell me this evening. But perhaps I'd better be going if talking hinders you."

"Now, don't 'ee take my words wrong way," said Jan earnestly. "It quite cheers I to have zomebody pleasant to talk to. But it be a long tale, and I'd rather hear you talk."

Ruth smiled. "You surprise me, Mr. Oxber. I didn't think there was a man in Barleigh could pay a vlattring compliment of that kind."

"I baint vlatteren. If I told 'ee that you had the zweetest voice I ever heard and the nicest vace I ever zeen, it baint vlattery, it be the solemn truth."

Ruth broke into a little laugh and turned her face away to hide its warmth. She did not reply on the moment, and Jan would not have been surprised to see her walk away without a word.

"You *are* a flatterer, Mr. Oxber," she said,

turning towards him with another laugh. "How dare you say you are not?"

"Because it be true, Miss Pocock," said Jan, feeling a little surer of his ground.

"Oh, dear, I can't stay and listen to any more. You are a dreadfully bold man," and with ethereal grace she danced off.

Jan felt that he had made wonderful progress, considering his inexperience, and he whistled cheerfully at his work. Ruth smiled on him at dinner and heaped his plate till he was almost ashamed, and made him take two helpings of apple-tart because she had made it. He was fascinated and bewildered. She smiled demurely at him when the miller told her that he was "no vooil," and quite agreed with him as to what was wrong.

After dinner, while the miller was taking a nap in the kitchen, Ruth played to him because he had said he was fond of music. She was not "showing off" he could see; it was done to entertain him, and the misery of the past month was swallowed up in this day of perfect bliss.

It had been a subject of gossip in Barleigh that Ruth copied the manners of "gurt ladies" to the extent of "dressing up" every afternoon in a "vine Zunday vrock." Jan thought of the angels when she came out to him that afternoon, clad in a white muslin gown, a crimson rose at her waist and another in her hair.



“ ‘ Now, are you content ? ’ ”

Jan Oxber]

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"I hope you are going to behave better this afternoon, Mr. Oxber," were her first words.

"Not when I zee 'ee like that," said Jan. "You make I think ov the angels."

"Well, well, Mr. Oxber! But there! I believe you say these things to all the girls you know, and so it comes quite easy to you."

"I never zaid anythen ov the kind to a maid avore. I never thought ut," said Jan so earnestly that it was impossible for Ruth to think that he was merely idly complimentary. Her face vied with the colour of the rose at her waist, but she answered him lightly,

"This is worse and worse, Mr. Oxber. And I can't be like an angel, for angels have wings."

"And that be all you need to be an angel. But angels be kind-hearted, I 'low, and iv you was kind-hearted you'd give I one ov they roses."

"A rose! to throw away, I suppose, or give to some other girl! No, I can't give you one."

Jan turned to his hammer and chisel, greatly rebuffed. He was not yet a profound student of the mysteries of the feminine mind.

"Why, how foolish you are, Mr. Oxber! I was only teasing you. I won't give you *one* rose, but both of them. Now, are you content?"

Jan pressed them to his lips, amazed at his own daring, and then looked for a place to put them. "Would 'ee keep 'em vor me till I go,

Miss Pocock?" he said. "They become 'ee better than me."

Ruth blushed, but woman is born fully equipped for the by-play of love, and she answered readily and, as Jan fancied, carelessly. "Yes, I'll keep them. But I must go or there'll be no tea for you, and you won't care for roses then."

In the evening Ruth took him round the garden and called upon him to admire her own flower-beds, after which, standing in the porch in the moonlight, Jan told her of his interview with Mr. Cranton. Ruth listened in silence save for a question now and again, but Jan felt that a current of intensest sympathy passed between them, and under its influence he told his story with rare art—laughter and pathos and dramatic feeling. He was as one intoxicated with the wine of life.

"You are a man, Mr. Oxber," she said when he had finished, her admiration shining in her eyes, "and there are so few real men to be met with. Poor Mr. Cranton!" She laughed softly.

Jan stood gazing out into the moonlight. The mill stood out clear before him in clear-cut silhouette, and the mill-pond was silver. He dared not look at her, lest he should forget everything, and take her in his arms. If he had only dared to touch her shoulder, or her dark-brown hair! The scene in the moonlight seemed a world of

pleasant dreams into which he had wandered, and the grotesque fancy entered his head that he had died, and was in the land of spirits.

"Poor Mr. Cranton!" he said with a low laugh like her own, assenting to her remark of some minutes before.

. . . "Are you fond of flowers, Mr. Oxber?"

"Vond? Well, yes I be," and he looked out on the molten silver in front of him, and laughed softly again without knowing why.

. . . "I—I noticed you kissed those roses this afternoon, and—I thought you must be."

. . . "Because ov where they'd come vrom
. . . I'd have been gladder to kiss the owner
iv I'd been brave."

. . . "You're given to kissing, I think."

"I never kissed a maid in my life. Vor why? I never zeen a maid I wanted to kiss till two or dree wiks ago."

"Didn't you? I don't believe in kissing myself, unless you are in love."

. . . "And how iv you be in love, and you've said nothen to a maid, and baint zure iv she be in love?"

. . . "I think it would be proper to kiss then. If you were kissed in return it would show that she liked it and loved you. If she did not, well——"

Jan looked out into the moonlight again for a minute or two. Then suddenly he turned and kissed her. It was not deliberative, and his lips went nearer to her ear than her mouth, but there was no mistaking its fervour.

He stood looking her in the face for some hour-like seconds. He felt as though he were looking into the barrel of a rifle which had a finger on its trigger.

Ruth took a step forward and kissed him squarely on the lips. Before he could recover himself she had fled indoors.

He stood motionless for an hour longer, and the miller, coming to lock the door, found him there, and wanted to know, "What in the name of patience he wanted moon-gazen at thik time ov night?"

Jan strode in with a feeble excuse, and went to his chamber. But he did not sleep ; the kingdom of the world and the glories thereof had been given him, for Ruth had kissed him with a kiss of love.

He rose early and took a walk in the woods. In the cold calm of the morning events often show themselves in a different aspect from what they did in the feverous glare of night, and Jan's mind was not at ease. The previous night seemed too like the unearthly joys of a dream to be real, and the horrible suggestion presented

itself that Ruth had been playing with him. Could it be possible that a princess would look with love on a beggar?

As he came back he met her, and all his doubts were set at rest. The love-light shone in her eyes, and a great wave of emotion passed over him. "Ruth, my Ruth!" he cried as he took her in his arms, and "Ruth!" again he cried as she met him with a fervour as great as his own. "I beg your pardon, my dear; I couldn' believe it true, and I misdoubted you meant it. My darlen!"

"John, I'm ashamed of you. Somebody will see you!" Ruth cried with an intonation that made Jan repeat himself.

"Who cares, my darlen? Let I carry thik pail, and walk beside 'ee. How came 'ee to love me? It don't zim real."

"Now *you* want flattering, John."

"No, not vlatteren, but it zims zo wonnerful I can't tell 'ee."

Ruth looked into his eyes, and she had to swing herself out of his reach as he met her look. "I love you, John—because I do, dear. I can't give you a better reason."

Jan would have taken her again, but, with a merry laugh, she ran, and he was out of breath before he caught her. "Will 'ee run away vrom I? Then I'll pay 'ee vor it. I want to zay that I love 'ee becos you be the sweetest maid I

ever zeen. I loved 'ee the avternoon I zeen 'ee at church, but I thought I should never have 'ee. There didn' zim the leastest chance. I——" Jan broke off, and Ruth laughed at his grave and troubled face. "But what will vather zay, my dear?"

"What will father say?" Ruth mimicked his tone and look. "You should have thought of that last night, John Oxber, when you kissed me." She tried, as Jan looked more woe-begone still, to look the same, but she failed, and ended with a laugh.

"I couldn' live without 'ee now, my Ruth. I'll ask he, iv he knocks I down vor it."

"We'll bring him to it, John, you and I. He has been hoping, John, that I shall come to look kindly on Frank Jonieson. But I shall marry you, my dear."

"You darlen! *My* darlen, I mean," and again he would have laid hands on her.

"No, John, you mustn't. You have to get father's consent first, you know."

"Kiss I agen, and I'll not care a varden."

"I don't think I can, John. I loved you because I thought you were brave, and straightway you turn a coward."

"Not iv you'll give I one."

"Well, just one, John, if it will make you brave again."

Jan sat with downcast head at breakfast, and

was much relieved when the miller began to tell an anecdote of his father and grandfather. It showed he suspected nothing. Jan worked very hard that morning, his mind divided between anxiety and love, as he thought first on parent and then on daughter. He finished just before noon, and was glad to know that he had made an excellent job of it. It would no doubt stand him in good stead at the coming interview.

Mr. Pocock set the wheel in motion, and, in silence, examined the repairs rather hypercritically. Jan stood by awaiting his verdict as anxiously as if he were a prisoner in the dock.

The miller took off his cap, scratched his head, gave another good look at the wheel, cleared his throat, and then slapped Jan on the back.

"A vurst-rate piece ov work, Jan, 'zno, and I be well pleased with ut. Name the damages."

Jan asked twelve shillings.

The miller answered with a grunt of contempt, and tried to put a sovereign in his hand. "Tell I twelve shillings, will 'ee? That be what I be gwain to pay."

"I can't take ut, Mr. Pocock ; I asked a vair price."

"Tik ut, my bwoy, tik ut ; I be well satisfied, 'zno."

"I can't take ut, Mr. Pocock. Don't 'ee be angry, but I be hopen and trusten to have some-

then else vrom 'ee," said Jan, moving restlessly from one foot to the other.

"What be that, Jan? Iv it be in reason tik ut straight away."

"You'll be angry, I veel zure, but I must tell 'ee. . . . It be Ruth. I love she."

"Wha—a—at? Be that how the wind do blow? My Ruth, zes he!" Mr. Pocock scratched his head vigorously, and stared at the wheel, and then turned to Jan. "Have 'ee zaid anythen to she?"

"Ees, I have; and she be willen to have I, loven I as don't deserve it, iv zo be as you won't zay no to we."

"Look zee, have 'ee zpoken to the maid avore thease wik?"

"No; but I loved she two or drie months agone, but I never had a chance ov speaken."

"Well, Jan, ov all the quick coorters, thee bist the very quickest. Mended a wheel and wooed a maid inside ov two days. It beats my coorten days, and I was reckoned ter'ble quick at the game."

"I've loved she vor months, Mr. Pocock."

"And she be willen?"

"She be."

"Then thee'st have her, Jan, my bwoy; zo 'ee shall, iv 'ee be as good a man at husbanden as menden a wheel. And, look zee, Jan, maids be

vond ov wearen a ring to show as they be caughted, 'zno, zo take thease money and buy she one." And before Jan could raise objections the sove-reign was slipped into his hand.

"And now, my bwoy, we'll go and drink the health ov the new team in zome good old ale."

They went in, and he called Ruth to him. "Ruth, what have 'ee been doen, 'zno? A young maid to run avter a man the very vurst day! Ter'ble, ter'ble! What would mother have zaid?"

Ruth knew her father's manner, but, nevertheless, she turned pale.


"Now, now, my maid," said the miller, "don't 'ee trouble. I must have my zay. I've made 'ee over to Jan here. Gie I a kiss vor luck."

Ruth's pallor changed to a happy blush, and, running up to him, she took his face between her hands and called him a dear old thing as she kissed him.

"Jan would like the twin to that," he said with a laugh. "Wouldn' 'ee, Jan?"

"He won't have one then," said Ruth saucily, and ran away.

"Here's health to both ov 'ee, Jan," said the miller; "and may you be zo lucky and contented as her mother and me. Thee baint zo well off as I should ha' liked her man to be, zeën as I give her a vurst-class eddication. But there! make her a good husband, and I have enough vor the pair ov 'ee."



CHAPTER III

JAN left perfect happiness and serenity behind him as he drove back home in the miller's trap. He had his mother to face, and, for the first time, there was bitterness in his thoughts concerning her. She had been a Book of Lamentations ere a maid had caught his fancy ; now he had chosen for all time, he could form a pretty accurate picture of her behaviour when he told her. From morning to night she would weep and complain to the tune of the workhouse. Then she would disapprove of his choice, and he would hear his Ruth criticised from a prejudiced mother-in-law's standpoint. It would be his "book-larnen" that had made him look so high and choose a wife that had a piano.

Jan felt certain that, in his present state of mind, he would not be able to control himself, and so decided he would say nothing about his engagement for the present.

It was the first time he had slept away from home, and his mother was glad to see him and hear all the news. He had to enter into full

particulars of his work, of his treatment, of how many pigs the miller had, and the price he had got for his last lot at Dorchester market. It was not until she had led him through the mill and farmyard that she questioned him about the household.

"Be thik maid ov Pokey's to hwome?"

"She be," said Jan shortly.

"What be her name?"

"Ruth."

"What do she do?"

"Kips house."

A contemptuous grunt. "Vine house-kipper, I warrant. Do she wash and bake and brew?"

"I don't know."

"Do she have any one to help?"

"There be a young maid about I zeen."

Another grunt. "Vine house-kipper, I warrant, avter beën at a boarden school. Haven' she a peanner?"

"Yes," more shortly still.

"What do a maid like she want a peanner vor?"

"To play, I 'low."

"To play! What do she want to play vor? What did it cost?"

"I hadn' the bad manners to ask."

"Ees, that be the way to treat thee pore old mother, snappen her off zo short as egg-shells.

A man can't git the way to know nothen. I'd ha' knowed what it cost iv I'd bin there, and not asked neither. I dessay it cost every ha'penny ov twenty pound. Pokey ought to know better than such zinfu! extravagance."

Jan went out, sick and bitter, and farther from confession than ever.

It had been arranged that he should go and spend his Sundays at the mill. On the following Saturday it was with a great effort he summoned up courage to tell his mother.

"I be haven a day out to-morrer, mother," he said with as cheery a tone as he could command.

"Well, my saints and prophets! Where be gwain?"

"Mr. Pocock asked I to go over and spend the day with en."

"What be gwain vor?"

"I told 'ee, to spend the day with en. I must kip in with en, vor he's bin very kind, and it'll be a goodish bit in my way, I 'low, to kip in with en."

"I don't zee as thee needs to go out. Thee's good liven to hwome."

"I be gwain : there's an end ov it."

Once with Ruth he forgot his troubles. At times when he realized that his mother was all that stood between him and happiness he had

a hard struggle to keep down devil-prompted wishes.

He could not make any excuse for the next Sunday, and he had to bring the storm about his head. His forecast was correct, save that it greatly under-estimated the violence of the tempest of revilings and tears. He endured for two days, and then broke out into such a fierce gust of anger as frightened and, for the moment, cowed Mrs. Oxber. "Iv 'ee want to go to the workhouse so mortal bad, go, and have done with it. But I won't stand thease zort ov gwain on no longer." He repented him, long and sorely, of his brutal speech, but in some degree it was salutary. Mrs. Oxber did not openly bemoan her fate again, but she went about the house wearing the long-suffering look of a much-abused woman.

Jan wore a countenance of funereal gloom when he met Ruth in the lane, where she had come to meet him.

"My dear, what is the matter?" she cried.

"I shall have to give 'ee up, my dear. It'll break my heart, but I shall have to do it."

By dint of much coaxing, Ruth got him to confess his troubles. To his surprise, she took them very lightly. "There's nothing to trouble about, you foolish dear," she said, caressing him. "You must persuade your mother to come here

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for a day next week, and if she does not go back to Barleigh thinking me the nicest girl she ever knew you shall give me up. Now be happy and look happy ; it will be all right, you will see."

On the following Thursday, the miller's trap stopped at the Oxbers' door. Jan had only told her that morning that she was invited to the mill. She protested that she would not go on any account, but she easily allowed herself to be persuaded.

Ruth was a true prophet : her future mother-in-law told her before she left that she could not think how she found time to keep the house so clean with only a troublesome little huzzy to help her—Jane had seen no reason for being "extra perlite" to a meddling old woman—and she did "play hymnses bootiful ; it made her eyes water and think of her Ben."

Although Mrs. Oxber now sang the praises of Ruth in his ears, Jan was still sorely troubled. He saw clearly that it would be doing Ruth the greatest injustice to marry and take his mother to live with them, and he knew well that she would never willingly consent to live apart from him, and coercion was not to be thought of. Sunday was an oasis in a desert of doubts and difficulties, and in its healing springs he found a tonic that saved him from moroseness and dejection.

The courtship had been going on for nine months when he heard, casually, that young Squire Deverill was at home and often dropped in at the mill for a chat with Pocock. Jan was uneasy; he could not bear to think of Ruth in the presence of the squire. The Deverills were a race whose very name roused all the fiery and stern Radicalism that was the essential fibre of his nature.

The Deverills of Plychett-Deverill Hall, which lay about four miles from Barleigh, had been the lords of that part of Wessex from time immemorial. The Hall was sacked and blown up by the Ironsides and not rebuilt until Anne's reign. Standing in a vast and densely wooded park, it would have been one of the most splendid seats in the South of England if the later Deverills had taken any pride in it. But, along with more culpable failings, their improvidence had passed into a proverb in the country-side.

The Deverills had come over with the Conqueror, and, for once, that was not a fact discovered in the nineteenth century. Some of the earlier Deverills, if old records do not exaggerate, were the greatest monsters this side of hell, and the Norman strain in their blood was responsible for the proud and fierce and cruel in their character. Deverills had fought with axe and lance in the Crusades; Deverills had waged war on bro-

ther lords when England was feudal and Stephen misruled ; Deverills had opposed the stern Hebraic Ironsides ; and Deverills, scoundrelly but courageous, had fallen in the struggle with the Corsican who was as a nightmare on English imagination. Their oppression and lust and dare-devil courage have been handed down from generation to generation in the traditions of the peasantry, and many shocking stories of dead and gone Deverills have I listened to in Peggin's kitchen. As for their virtues, are they not told in storied brass and marble and stained glass in the church at Déverill ?

The present squire is an elderly man with intellect that can hardly be described as profound. He ran through his passions in early youth, and is now a harmless, good-natured, imbecile sort of man. His wife rules him, and for him ; the estate was never better managed, and never were the peasantry better taught to understand their station.

It was the cousin of the present squire who was contemporary with Jan Oxber—the “ young squire ” as he was known at the time. Three weeks after his coming of age his father, riding out to hunt after a night with the decanter, broke his neck at a fence, and Sir Sydney the younger reigned in his stead.

The peasantry knew little of the young squire,

save by rumour, as it was only at rare intervals that he came home while his father was alive. It was said that he had lived a wild life at Oxford until he was asked to depart, and that months of mad dissipation in London and Paris followed. It was known that the quarrels between his father and himself, from the time he was a schoolboy, had been as fierce as the Deverill blood. If we are victims of heredity and environment, the young squire deserved nothing but profoundest pity.

When he began to reign he was a fine-looking, haughty young fellow, with the characteristic sharp nose, black eyes and curly hair of the Deverills. When he chose, he had the sweetest manners of any man in the country. "A pleasant-spoken young gentleman he be," passed from house to house, and better things were hoped from his reign.

"The young squire do come here, don't 'ee?" said Jan timorously the next time he saw Ruth.

"Yes, he's had a good deal of business with father lately," Ruth answered carelessly, and her unconcerned manner greatly relieved Jan.

"I were avraid he might be comen to zee you, my dear."

"Why, you foolish fellow," said Ruth with a laugh, "do you think the squire envies you?"

"He have good cause to, my dear, but it

baint that. He baint a good enough man to sit down where you be, my dear. None ov they Deverills be."

"I fancy he is better than the rest of his family, John. He is a pleasant-spoken gentleman and far different from his father."

"He be too mighty pleasant-spoken, I've heard."

"He is a well-mannered gentleman, and he has such a beautifully soft, musical voice," answered Ruth, a little sharply. "Whatever sort of a man he is I don't know or want to know, but here he acts like a gentleman and looks one."

"They Deverills allus were mighty pleasant-spoken and nice and zaft in their ways when it suited them. Only it be the zort ov zaft a cat has when it be about to zpring. But I don't want to vex 'ee, my dear."

Ruth answered nothing : it was the first little difference that had occurred in their courtship, and they walked some way in silence. When speech did return to them it was constrained and had passed from matters of love to gossip of the neighbourhood.

Some weeks later, Jan, to his great joy, had another job at the mill which took him three days. It was the very tip of bliss to live with Ruth, and to see her in sun-bonnet and with her dainty arms bared to the elbow going about

her household tasks. "You be zweet on Zundays, my darlen," said Jan, "when you be wearen your best vrock, but I do believe I most love to zee 'ee on every-days best. You look now like a pictur a man 'ould allus wish to have by en."

"A picture not fit to be seen, you mean I am just now, John."

"No, I don't. But I do zay as when a woman do look zweet and tenderzome in her workenclothes she be a woman worthy the best ov men's fancies. Now it be my belief, my dear," pointing his sentences with uplifted hammer, "as iv you put zome ov thease grand ladies, as ride about in carriages and dress like queens, avore a wash-tub with their sleeves rolled up and a worken vrock on, they'd look as ugly as zin. Now you look a pictur, as I zaid."

"Oh, John, do be quiet; you'll be saying next that I am as handsome as a lady."

"I do zay it, vor I allus thought 'ee handsome as the young queen herself. When I take 'ee to church vor the last time as a maid, I shall zay, 'I've got the best and prettiest maid in England to wife.'"

That evening they took a walk, and, in the fields beyond the wood, chanced upon the young squire taking a walk with his dogs. He examined Jan keenly as they approached, and Jan, who had

not seen him for years, eyed him as keenly. As they passed him he lifted his cap. "Good-evening, Miss Pocock," he said with his sweetest smile.

Jan knew nothing of the niceties of etiquette as "gurt volks" understand it, but, not to be outdone in politeness, he touched his cap in return.

Ruth blushed deeply and turned to her lover a little triumphantly. "There, John! I told you he was polite and pleasant. There are not many who raise their hats to me, but he did."

"That be right enough," said Jan, mollified by the respect shown to his darling, "vor you be worthy ov his respec', squire as he be. But, as you zaid, he be a pleasant and polite young gent. May be he'll turn out a better man than his vather and his vamily."

"Every man ought to raise his cap to a lady when he meets her or leaves her," said Ruth; "but who about here does so? Cranton can raise his hat, and smile till he looks like an ape grinning, when he meets the rich; but, of course, I'm of no account with him—only a miller's daughter."

"Cranton! Cranton be a vooil, my dear," said Jan with contemptuous emphasis.

Jan said nothing to Ruth's lesson on etiquette, but when he was bidding her good-bye, with a mighty blush he lifted his hat to her. It was the first time in his life he had attempted it, and it

was a failure. He took hold of the brim, which, being flexible, did not lift the hat. He was obliged to pull it off, dragging his hair upright in so doing. But at their next meeting he did it perfectly, and was rewarded by a smile from Ruth. He did not tell her, however, that he had practised before the glass every night after his mother had gone to bed.

Jan's lines at home were not any pleasanter, though the vexation had assumed a different form. Since her visit to Tiford, Mrs. Oxber had passed from the querulous to the exulting mood, which, to Jan, was a step nearer the intolerable. As many of the neighbours as she could hobble to see, or she could entrap at her own door, were entertained with a highly-coloured account of the great match her Jan had made, and of the glories of Tiford Mill.

"She be a real clever maid," she told everybody. "She do play the peanner bootiful, bootiful! And she'll make a good wife, I 'low; she do bake the nicest bread, and her vloors—well, 'ee could eat your dinner off 'em, and be no pig neither. She be a real clever, vine maid, and the vace ov her be zomethen to zee. She be Pokey's only child, and the mill will go to 'em when Pokey do go. I zaid many's the time to my Ben, 'Mark my words, our Jan will marry well.'

The gossips faithfully distributed her confidences broadcast in the village. Curiously enough, Barleigh did not see any particular reasons for congratulating Jan. They expected much from the man who had braved the "pasion," went to Suckton night-school, and could talk like a Parliament man; and they rather thought he'd have looked higher than Pokey's daughter, though she had been brought up in a boarding-school.

Winter came, and Mrs. Oxber had an attack of her old complaint. She recovered from it more rapidly than usual, but a few weeks later she suddenly failed, and Jan had a weary and anxious time before him. He got a neighbour's wife to attend to her, but she uttered loud complaints if he left her for ten minutes in the evening, and he had to remain constantly about the house. His Sundays were spent in listening to her rambling complaints, and, save on one occasion when the miller drove in to see him, he did not see any one from Tiford for many weeks.

One Sunday, about two months after she had fallen ill, Mrs. Oxber seemed better, and Jan seized the opportunity to run over to Tiford, only to find that Ruth had gone to stay with an aunt at Odstow. Odstow lay six miles away, on the other side of Deverill Park, and to visit

her there was out of the question. As it was, he could only stay for half an hour's chat with the miller, and it aggravated his worry to learn that Ruth was unwell and had gone away for a change.

But his troubles for the day were not over. His mother was better when he left her; he returned to find her much worse and unconscious.

"It be the last change," the woman who was watching her whispered to him; and so it proved. They sat with her through the night. As it passed, and the black turned to grey, her spirit fled, and Jan was left motherless.

Mrs. Pointon's mother and other neighbours assisted him in his arrangements for the funeral, and it was as well for his popularity in the village that they did so. He had an idea of asking only a few friends to attend, but his advisers would not allow it. It was proved to him that it was indispensable to invite the goodman of each family that had been at all intimate with his mother to join the funeral procession, and after the ceremony to provide them with a substantial tea. Funerals are an institution in Barleigh, as in most rural localities, and are regulated according to a long-standing and rigid etiquette, and to overlook a neighbour at such a time is to rouse in him a life-long resentment. You may make merry without your neighbour, and, though he

will growl at your niggardly ill-manners, he will forgive it ; but to bury your dead without his aid is an intolerable insult.

Jan sent an invitation to Tiford, and, to his great satisfaction, the miller attended. There was no opportunity for private speech, but Pocock invited him to go over to the mill for a day or two as soon as possible.

Mr. Cranton's rancour was not a thing so light that the death of a vulgar peasant woman could remove it, and he commanded his curate to conduct the service. Jan, however, was not troubled by the petty display of spite ; his resentment against his pastor had long since passed into contempt.

Jan decided to live alone until his marriage, which he hoped would take place in a few weeks. As soon as he had executed some repairs, which had been neglected during his mother's illness, he went to Tiford.

" I was comen in thease avternoon, my bwoy," said the miller, " to zee what had become ov 'ee. How be ? "

" As well as could be expected. How be Ruth ? "

" She be at Odstow yet, but she be comen hwome the marnen. Look zee, Jan, stop here the night, and then do 'ee go and fetch she back instead ov me. Will that do vor 'ee ? "

"Vurst-rate, thank 'ee," said Jan, his face brightening up wonderfully. He was up before the miller next morning, and would have gone off without breakfast had Pocock allowed it.

Ruth was sitting in the garden as Jan drove up. "Jan, you!" she cried; "is something wrong; is father ill?"

"No, my darlen; I've come vor 'ee," he said, as he took her in his arms. "Why, you baint well; you be tremblen now."

"I was so startled, dear, for I never expected you. I am not very well, but better than when I came. But how are you, my dear? What a troubled time you have passed through, my poor John!"

"It have been a tryen time, but we'll not talk ov it now, my darlen. Wiks and wiks I haven't zeen 'ee, my darlen."

He had to stay to dinner, and was very uncomfortable. Miss Pocock was a short-sighted, deaf old lady with an unfortunate habit of unconsciously speaking her thoughts, and she plied Jan with very personal questions which it made him blush to answer. He was glad when he had Ruth in the pony-trap and could talk to her without an old lady's interpellations.

"And how have 'ee enjoyed yourself, my darlen?" asked Jan.

"I could not enjoy myself away from you,

John. I am glad to be back again with you, my love!"

It was said so fervently that Jan could do no other than leave the mare to her own devices while he did a little love-making.

"I hope we zhall be together zoon vor all our days," said Jan tenderly, and his heart leapt again when she pressed his arm and looked with eyes big with love in his face. It was well the mare was sensible, for Jan did little driving on that journey.

"When zhall it be, my darlen?" he asked presently. "I be left all alone now, and you must take pity on me."

"As soon as you like, dear. Please God, John, you may never repent!" she said earnestly and solemnly.

"No veer ov that, my Ruth; it will be you as may have cause to repent. Repent!" He laughed in derision. "Iv there be one thing I couldn' repent, it would be haven you vor a wife."

That evening the young squire came to see Pocock, and was talking with him at the mill-door when Jan happened to come into the yard. "Is not that Oxber, the wheelwright?" he asked.

"Ees, zur, it be."

"A good, steady workman, I have heard?" he said inquiringly.

"That he be, zur, a real——"

"He is the very man I wanted to see. I was about to ride down to the village to see him. Would you mind calling him here?"

But the miller went to fetch him instead, that he might whisper a word in his ear. "Jan, my bwoy, the zquire wants to zpeak to 'ee. Zome-then good in the wind, I 'low. Come on, quick."

Jan's mind, as he stepped forward, was given up to the consideration of the important point whether or no he should touch his cap. He decided that he would not.

"Oh, Oxber," said the squire with his most charming manner, "I was coming to Barleigh expressly to see you. I have learnt that your mother is dead, and," with a smile, "I have heard that you intend marrying soon. I wish to offer you the position of foreman of the carpenters on the estate. The wages I give are two guineas a week, but the work is not heavy; your duties would be to report to the steward as to what repairs may be necessary, and, if he gives you leave, to carry them out. What do you say?"

"I hardly know what to zay, zur. You zee, zur, there be zomebody else to think about besides myself."

"Certainly, certainly. Come and see me in the morning, after you have talked it over with

Pocock here. But mind, if you decide to take it, I shall want you to marry at once, as you will have to live in the cottage near the West Lodge, and there might be unpleasantness with the other fellows if I set a bachelor over them. Think it over. Good-evening."

"Good-evenen, and thank 'ee, zur." Jan raised his cap this time.

A committee of three at once sat to consider the proposal, and it was unanimously agreed that Jan should accept the post. The next morning he went on two errands—to the Hall and to the parish clerk's. The banns were to be published for the first time on the following Sunday.

It was now a time of deep joy for Jan. As the hour approached, Ruth seemed to lean upon him more and more and to love him with an affection that was at once wistful and tender. His happiness was too deep for words, and it sent him to his knees to pray that he might be worthier of her and that love might abide though the earth were moved.

When Mr. Cranton understood that the marriage had the approval of the squire, his cold severity changed to a cordiality that was loathsome to Jan. "A good choice, Oxber," he said, "a very good choice. You have been very fortunate in obtaining Sir Sydney's patronage."

The miller was responsible for the marriage-

feast, and his hospitality was prodigal in spite of the remonstrances of Jan and Ruth. Any one who cared to come was welcome, and old men and women still speak of it as one of the most notable events in their lives.

They were married on an April morning, one of the perfect days of early spring when Nature first puts on her sunniest smile. After the wedding-breakfast they went to Weymouth for a week's honeymoon. Nothing stamped their position so much on the rural imagination as the wedding-tour : it was the hall-mark of gentility.

CHAPTER IV

THE miller kissed his daughter warmly when they returned, and then turned to Jan. "How dost 'ee like it, my bwoy?" he asked with a twinkle in his eyes, "now thee's gotten she?"

"We haven't quarrelled yet," said Jan with a laugh.

"He has been very nice so far, father," said Ruth. "He did not beat me all the week."

"It have been lonely without 'ee, my dear," said the miller. "I zhall veel lonely vor a time, I expects."

"We shan't be half a mile away, father," said Ruth cheerily. "If you want me very badly just hang your handkerchief on a pole—I could see it quite plainly from the cottage—and I'll come at once. And you know, father, you will have to come up every evening and smoke your pipe with us."

Old Miss Pocock had come from Odstow to keep house for her brother, for some weeks at least. She would not give up her house in Odstow, for she doubted whether she and her

brother could live together amicably for any length of time. "James always was queer from a boy," Miss Pocock told her niece, and the miller thought it was a pity that Sarah never married, as a husband would have worn some of the corners off her. Ruth thought the scheme might work. "She could often slip across," she said, "and see to her father in some of his little ways, and no doubt after a while he would be comfortable."

The house of the wedded pair stood just within the park boundaries, some way off from the drive. It was a neat cottage of Bath stone—built at the time the Hall was restored from the surplus material—with narrow, old-fashioned windows and a verandah. The kitchen-garden at the back intercepted a tumbling brook that eventually became one of the feeders of the mill-pond; in the front was a little lawn, bordered by flower-beds and shrubs, and shut in from inquisitive and marauding cattle by an iron fence. It was a pretty and commodious place, almost palatial compared with the cottage in Barleigh, and Jan was proud of it. "Oh, my darlen," he said after a week's trial of it, "I could wish vor nothen better than to bide here all my life with 'ee, and, iv God zo please, a bwoy and a maid or two to climb my knees when work be over."

Ruth blushed furiously. "Hush, Jan."

"Why, my darlen, baint it what we'm to expect? To zee 'ee as a wife be enough vor I, but to zee 'ee with a little one——" and he completed his sentence with a close embrace.

He threw himself into his duties with great zeal, and at times made himself a nuisance to the steward, whose concept of his duty to his employer was a policy of masterly inactivity. Jan had the spirit of a reformer inbred, and sympathized too much with the poor to put them off with vague promises when they complained of roofs that were sieves and floors and walls that were always damp.

The tenants were loud in his praise. "We'm got our pore bits ov houses zeen to as has been bad vor years," said they; "he do zee to things, do Jan Oxber. A good day vor we pore volks when zquire took he on." Nor did his popularity abate when he took the tenants to task for their insanitary habits. They had never found any harm come from the cesspool in front of the door and the contiguous pig-sty, but Jan was "a clever and well-wishen man and they would do ut to oblige him."

Late in June, Jan's duties took him to the Odstow part of the estate, and he and his subordinates were at work in that village for several days.

One afternoon he was at work alone, en-

deavouring to make water-tight the bedroom window of a cottage inhabited by a widow, when she came out to gossip with him.

"Baint 'ee Jan Oxber as lived down to Barleigh?" she asked, after watching him with great attention for some little time.

"Ees, I be."

"I ovten heared ov 'ee avore thee took on thease work. Wasn' thee mother a Penny vrom Piddle?"

"Zo I allus heard," said Jan.

"Oh, I knowed she when she was a maid. She was years older than me, I mind."

"A lot knowed she," said Jan.

"Didn' 'ee marry Pokey's darter down to Tiford?"

"I married Mr. Pocock's daughter," he said briefly, resenting the familiarity of "Pokey."

The woman laughed.

"And thee got the voreman's place when thee wed she?"

"Ees," said Jan very curtly, disliking the woman's tone more than before.

"I zeen the maid when she was down to her aunt's here. Ruth she was called, warn't she?" And again the woman laughed.

Jan took no notice of her, but went on steadily with his work. By-and-by the woman went on again. "Ah, dear! how vrail we pore women

be when a praper man takes our vancy! . . . And the zquire's plan suited 'ee? Well, well, everybody to their own liken."

"What do 'ee mean?" said Jan, irritated by the woman's tone and still more by her cackling laugh.

"Mean? Nothen, nothen. I've nothen to zay."

"Well, zay nothen then, zpecially 'bout my wife, iv 'ee please." Jan's tone was rough to fierceness. "Iv she do dress like a lady she be worthy ov it."

Mrs. Dimont stared at him, but said nothing further. Jan's irritation, however, was aggravated when a minute or two later he saw her go into the next house, and could hear the two gossips laughing together.

"Do the zquire ovten come to thease part?" Jan asked Mrs. Dimont the next day. It was an attempt at friendliness on his part, as, on thinking it over, he feared he had been rather churlish.

"The zquire? He do go where there be anything to take his vancy. My man used to zay as zquire was allus to be found where there was a pretty vace. He was here a goodish bit zome time since, but he don't come now." And again her dissonant laugh jarred on his nerves.

Jan was busy measuring the dilapidated ceiling

while she spoke, and did not reply. The woman hung about him for a time as if anxious for further gossip, but Jan was silent and left the cottage as soon as he could.

He had a walk of nearly five miles, taking the nearest way across the park, after his day's work was done, but he set off cheerily. Night began to fall ere he was half way home. Rabbits, by hundreds, scudded out of his path, and he amused himself by flinging his cap at them. The deer lifted their heads to look at him, and he laughed to see them start up affrightedly when he flung a stone in their midst. His step was buoyant, and he whistled as light-heartedly as a school-boy. He was hastening on to home and light and love.

A thought struck him, as suddenly and unexpectedly as a lightning flash in a cloudless sky. He came to a dead halt and the bag slipped from his shoulder, and for a moment his heart ceased beating. Then the blood rushed to his head in one tumultuous wave, and brought, as it seemed to him, his thoughts rushing together to make a mountain of agony. He dropped on the dew-damped grass and hid his face in it. "Lord, Lord, it can't be, it can't be! Can it, Lord?" he cried, the sweat starting from every pore.

He lay there with his face buried, shaking like one in a palsy, fighting black thoughts with

thoughts that, in spite of himself, were blacker still.

A colt came timidly up and sniffed at him ; then, startled to find the object human, kicked up its heels in timorous haste. The sound startled Jan and he looked up. The beauty had gone from the landscape, the air seemed to hang as a funeral pall around him. But he must play the man if hell had come to him, and he sprang up and, forgetting his bag, started for home at a run. When a ditch intervened he crossed it at a bound ; when a hedge that could not be leapt came in his way he crashed through it, unheeding thorns and briers.

At his garden-gate he stopped and his lip quivered. "What iv I be a wicked vooil?" he muttered. "God vorgive I iv I be, and God help I iv I baint." He waited until he had some command of himself, then lifted the latch and walked in with sickly fear.

Ruth was sitting in an easy chair, her needlework in her lap, but she rose with a bright smile to welcome him. "You are late, dear," she said, "and how tired you look."

He looked her over with one quick, piercing glance that saw all. Sinking into a chair he covered his face with his hands. A groan burst from him that came from the deeps of despair.

"What is the matter, my dear?" said Ruth, a

world of love and affection in her tone. But her voice was not steady and Jan's ear was preternaturally acute just then.

He looked up, and wrath, and sorrow, and despair were written deep on his face.

"The matter?" he cried. "That," and he pointed his finger at her.

Modesty painted her a vivid red for an instant; terror struck the blood inward the next; and she put her hands feebly before her as if to hide what could not be hidden.

"What be the matter?" he repeated with an inexorable bitterness. "That I be a vooil, a damned blind vooil."

With a faint cry she sank down and buried her face.

"What be the meanen ov that? Do 'ee want tellen?" he asked in a tone that no prevarication could meet. She sat trembling and breathing in hard, quick gasps, but uttered no word.

"The—pleasant—young—zquire," he said with a bitter sneer; but, feeling this was not the moment for sneers, he corrected himself. "Be thease the zquire's doens? Answer me."

She looked up and her lips trembled, but no sound came from them. Her face looked as if Death had stricken her soul and left her body alive to suffer.

"Don't hide yourself," he said; "baint I your

husband, damned blind vooil Jan Oxber?" Never before in his life had he uttered a profane word, and, to Ruth, it was something awful, as an index of the tempest that raged within him.

They sat in silence for some minutes and then Ruth looked up. "Oh, John," she cried, "I have been very wicked, very wicked, I know; but, oh, John, can't you forgive me?"

"Thease be the time vor tellen, not vorgiven. I be a pore zaft-headed vooil, as you thought. Did 'ee go to Odstow to zee en better?"

. . . "I went to get out of his way, John, and God knows that is the truth. But he came out there to find me."

"That be a lie," said Jan, his ear still acute for tone and accent. "You were a fallen woman avore you went there. And that you know."

"No! no! John; no!"

"You knowed what his purpose was at any rate, and you went there well knowen it. I call that fallen. How ovten did he come to zee 'ee there? And the truth, vor God's sake."

He had to repeat the question before she could falter out that it was every day.

"And then," said Jan, letting every word fall like a knife-stab; "and then ye two, knowen how you were, I dessay, arranged between 'ee that I should marry 'ee and have thease job, and be thankful to the zquire vor what he had done.

Oh, Ruth, Ruth"—his voice changed for the moment to a heart-broken wail—"and I loved 'ee!"

"Forgive me, John!" she cried, her eyes gleaming with the wildness of insanity.

"P'r'aps I could have vorgiven 'ee iv 'ee had told me all avore I married 'ee. But to think that 'ee could believe that I could be bought to my wife's shame vor vorty shillens a wik! Oh, Ruth, you've broken my heart," and Jan buried his head in his arms on the table. It was a long time before he opened his eyes or spoke. If agony could wash away sin, Ruth's soul would have been as white as a little child's in the hell of suffering that she was then enduring.

Presently he raised his head and asked abruptly, "When—be—it—expected?" His face, as she saw it in its terrible anguish, smote Ruth more than all his anger.

"In—in a month or two, John."

"And zo it was kalkilated that I would marry 'ee, and it would be only what volks call a hasty marriage? And I held 'ee zo pure and innocent and thought 'ee an angel! Oh, Ruth!"

"John! John!"

"Now listen: I zhall take thease on my own shoulders, and when volks laugh and zay, 'I did think Jan Oxber would ha' kept vrom a maid while a maid,' I zhall have to bear it quietly and

smile at it. And when they do zay, 'And his wife be no better than the rest ov vrail women,'"
—Jan's teeth gritted—"I zhall have to bear that quietly, and zhall have no right to knock a man down vor it. Vor ye two calkilated right; I zhall take the blame on myself and none zhall ever know vor zure that I took a spoiled woman to wife. And you will tell nobody how it happened—it be a secret vor the dree ov us. As vor the zquire" — Jan's calmness was as ominous as a thunder-cloud—"he zhall zay nothen. . . . When you likes you can go to bed; I zhall sleep on the sofa. And get ready vor moven out ov here by the end ov the wik. We be gwain to Barleigh to live. And God help I and they iv any crosses my will!"

There was silence for a moment, then Ruth was at his feet with eyes so full of beseeching and love that he dared not look at her lest his purpose should fail.

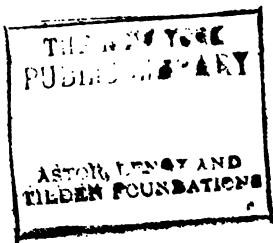
"John, forgive me for God's sake! John! John! I have been very wicked, my husband, but I couldn't help it. I love you, John, and never loved any one else. He fascinated me and I couldn't resist. I was as helpless as that rabbit you had in your hand yesterday. It was because I was a weak and cowardly woman that it happened, and I could not tell you. John, I love you! Kill me now; I'll die blessing you if you'll



"With eyes so full of . . . love that he dare not look at her."

Jan Oxbor

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kill me, but forgive me, John, and don't take your love away. You are brave and don't know what it is to be a woman."

Jan sat dimly wondering if this pleading woman could be his Ruth whom he had left with a kiss that morning.

"John, forgive me. I cannot live another day unless you do. You are all the world to me, John. You took me for better, for worse. It's the blackest and worst, but you took me. I cannot live through this night unforgiven."

Suddenly there came upon him the remembrance of that night when he had stood in the porch with her, and she had kissed him and fled indoors, and his anger dropped from him, for the moment, like a garment. "Let me go out into the garden for a time, Ruth," he said almost humbly. "At my veet be no place vor you."

He put her gently aside and went out, while Ruth, prostrate on the floor, prayed as men and women pray when the golden apples of life become Dead Sea fruit—prayed that her sin might not have such unendurable punishment. Jan, with clenched hands, paced to and fro across the little lawn, now with heavy, dragging footsteps, now with quick, jerky strides, fighting out his fate and Ruth's. He loved her as deeply as ever with every fibre of his being—that was the

bitterness of it—and he felt that he could never forgive the wrong she had done him. His Ruth he had held so innocent and pure, a fallen woman! The thought awoke a passion in him that was almost the lust of blood. Love that should have been the Source of all Joy had become the Root of all Bitterness.

But by-and-by his love came uppermost. He had told her once, he remembered, and not long ago, that nothing would ever shake his love. Was his anger so much because of the wrong she had done him, or was it because he could not pride himself in, and boast himself of, her purity and innocence; because he had all unwittingly taken a spoiled woman to his bosom? Was not Ruth, blemished as she was, immeasurably above all other women? His heart said yes. And then she had looked at him and told him, in tones whose sincerity he could not mistake, that she was helpless in her betrayer's hands.

Ay, and Ruth had not dared to tell him how helpless!

His mood changed and a great gush of pity and affection for her coursed through his being. It was again a devil-begotten Deverill who had undone a woman in her helplessness. "My poor Ruth!" he cried, and his pity was transformed into relentless anger against the destroyer. He should pay for every tear and pang they had

suffered, even if it were with his heart's blood. What horrors his wife must have passed through! He must go and comfort her.

He strode indoors and took her up gently from the floor and kissed her. "I vorgive 'ee, my darlen; I vorgive 'ee," he said.

"Oh, John!" she cried wildly as she looked at him, "but your love is gone. You have no love for me any longer. You have forgiven me, but you have not taken me back."

"It be because I loved 'ee zame as ever that I found it zo hard to vorgive 'ee, Ruth. Love 'ee!" he laughed still bitterly; "it wouldn' have hurt I iv I hadn' loved 'ee with my whole heart and zoul. I vreeley vorgive 'ee, my darlen, and I couldn' help loven 'ee whatever had happened," and he kissed her again.

A tempest is often followed by a profound calm, yet in the heart of the forest are mangled boughs and scattered foliage; and, though Nature soon hides the scars, never again can the forest be quite as before. So it was with Jan and Ruth when the tempest was stilled; though, with one accord, they sought to hide its ravages, and Jan was unusually tender.

"We'm both to live now zo as none zhall know," he said gently as he caressed her. "There's to be no tears and sorrow, and we must try and vorget it all. But we leave thease

place next wik. I zhall give notice the mar-nen."

"Where must we go, John?"

"To your vather's or down into Barleigh. I zhall follow my wrighten agen."

"Not into Barleigh, don't take me to Barleigh! I can face my father, but not Barleigh folks."

"Well, zo let it be, my dear. . . . My pore Ruth, my pore Ruth! . . . Let we have supper now."

Ruth stared in amazement. The latter sentence was in his ordinary tone, and all anger and trouble seemed to have gone from his countenance. She could not have guessed what it cost him thus to school his voice and features.

Bedtime came, and Ruth, remembering what he had said, looked forward to it with apprehension. "John," she said timidly when she could summon up courage to speak, "are you coming with me?"

He cleared his throat and spoke with something that was almost a sob. "I've vorgiven 'ee, my darlen."

"God bless you, John," she said with deep fervour. "God will reward you for this."

The young squire happened to be in town, and Jan went the first thing the next morning to the steward and gave a week's notice. He

would have left at once had he not been afraid that it might excite suspicion.

"What! Don't you like the place?" asked Coamer, in deep amazement. "What the devil is the meaning of it?"

"Well, zur, I don't care vor the place; I'd rather be at wheelwrighten."

"The squire will kick up a row when he hears. You have only held the place a few weeks."

"It can't be helped, zur. I be gwain, as I zaid."

The steward wrote to his master that evening to tell him the news, and congratulated him on getting rid of a servant who had proved himself as obstinate as a mule and most incredibly ungrateful.

Jan had to face a fiery storm at the mill, but he did not flinch. He waited patiently until his father-in-law had exhausted himself, and then said, "Ruth can't bide there no longer. She wants to be back here. I be away all day, and it be ter'ble lonesome."

"She told I t'other day she liked it vurst-rate. And baint 'ee master ov thee own house?" he added savagely.

"I've learnt already that it be best to humour women's vancies, vather; didn' you when she bided to hwome?"

The miller glared at him for a moment, then broke into a laugh. "Look zee, Jan, bring she

on, bag and baggage, when ye likes. I know she, 'zno. Vor my own sake I baint zorry; it have been lonesome since she went."

Jan went about his duties the next week as if nothing had happened. He did not tell the tenants he was going, but the aggrieved steward spread the news all over the estate. "Can't 'ee stay, Jan?" said the tenants; "we volks was never zo well looked avter."

"I be zorry," was Jan's unvarying reply, "but I must look at the best vor myself, do 'ee zee?"

At home and to the world Jan, by a supreme effort of will, wore a mask of cheerfulness and good humour. It was only in his moments of solitude that he allowed his feelings to have the mastery. He had brought himself to believe thoroughly that Ruth was a victim, and as a corollary that Deverill was an unspeakable monster.

Ruth had also learnt to school herself, and she met her husband with quiet tenderness and cheerful ways. Once or twice she tried to be merry, but it was the ghastliest failure; mirth and buoyancy had left her for ever. It had been Jan's greatest delight after work was done to sit smoking his pipe in her easy chair, while she played and sang to him. Her music always stirred him to the depths, and made him thank Heaven in fervent gratitude for the happiness that had

been vouchsafed him. But he said nothing now it had ceased. He well understood that her singing would end in sobs.

Ruth's was not one of the deepest natures, but she loved her husband with her whole heart and soul. She mourned her sin with an unceasing agony that nothing could alleviate, not so much because it was sin as because it had inflicted on her husband an irremediable wound. She saw herself, as she thought, with his eyes—a body defiled and loathsome, a moral and physical leper. She knew he still loved her, but that brought no comfort. If love had been wanting she would have defended herself and made light of her fall. But Jan loved her and she had wounded his love, and she went down on her knees many times a day, and, with groans and tears, prayed, as she well knew, the vainest of prayers: "Oh, God, for Christ's sake, make it as if it had never been. For John's sake, Lord."

Maternity had begun to stir her, but it brought no joy. On the contrary, she felt it but as the sign and reward of her fall. Every flutter and pang of motherhood scorched her face with intolerable shame, and she dared not look at herself in the mirror. At such times it seemed to her that only brutality from her husband would make her lot endurable, and she even prayed that Jan might mock and scorn and ill-use her—anything

rather than meet her with unfaltering love and gentleness. She suffered acute physical anguish rather than betray by word or sign the delicate state of health that was now daily increasing with her. "My pore Ruth!" said Jan to himself scores of times a day, when floods of pity overwhelmed him. He did not know how much she needed his pity.

Jan had not mentioned Deverill's name to her again, and she knew nothing of his hourly-increasing hatred. She had been influenced by her rural environment, where it was taught and believed that squire and parson were as the Lord's anointed, and, despite her sympathy with Jan in his struggle with Cranton, she could not wholly shake off the feeling that the nobility were not as other men. Jan had been too full of love-making to preach his iconoclastic doctrines to her, and she supposed that he had accepted it as a wrong beyond vengeance.

They left their cottage at the end of the week. Jan had intended to follow his old occupation, but the miller, who feared that if he regained his old business he would go back to Barleigh and the mill would lose Ruth again, persuaded him to assist at the mill. "I be gotten wold, 'zno, and ye two will have thease place when I be gone, and thee have a lot to learn 'bout millen yet."

Ruth was in perpetual fear that her father

would guess her secret, but the old man suspected nothing. He prided himself on his acuteness, but, in most things, he was unsuspecting as a child. Ruth rarely went out, and so far the breath of scandal had not been wafted to the mill.

CHAPTER V

JAN had worked patiently at the mill for several weeks when he heard that the squire had returned for a brief stay. As soon as work was over Jan haunted the park and the lanes and fields around. He saw his enemy several times, but not alone, and he forbore to go to him. He prowled about for over a week, his thirst for vengeance feeding on the delay, and then met him by accident one afternoon in the West Wood.

Jan looked up, smiling and happy, as soon as he saw his late master, and the squire congratulated himself on it.

"Oxber, my good man, is that you?" he said. "I was very vexed to find you had thrown up the place I gave you, very vexed. I thought it was a capital chance for you, and, from all I hear, you did very well at it. It was most foolish."

Jan stood with the diffident look and manner of one who is reproved by his betters. If the

squire had only known what grimness lay concealed, he would not have faced the matter so lightly.

"Beggen your pardon, zur, I liked my old work the best."

"Well, I am quite vexed. I was hoping to make you under-steward after a time, as Coamer wants an assistant."

"That be out ov my line at present, zur. But, beggen your pardon agen—you be one ov the gentry and most likely to know—could 'ee tell I what gurt volks do when they vall out? I be curious to know, iv it baint troublen 'ee too much. Zuppose you called a man a liar or a thief, what would the gentleman be like to do?"

Deverill laughed with much amusement. "It is rather a curious question, Oxber, certainly. The thing is out of date now, but if any man did so to me I should probably strike him, and then, if he were not a coward, we should fight a duel. Duelling, though, is gone out of fashion in this country, I am sorry to say."

"And iv he called 'ee worse than that, it would still be a duel, I z'pose?"

"Yes, I suppose so, Oxber. Are you thinking of fighting a duel, then?" with an amused laugh.

Jan's face became as grim as a Berserker's. "Thank 'ee, Zquire Deverill," he said slowly. "Now, and vor zome reasons I be zorry there

baint no onlookers, I call you, Zquire Deverill, a LIAR—and a THIEF—and a COWARD—and a BEAST—and a SCOUNDREL!” Jan was pale, and cool, and calm, but he rapped out the epithets with metallic clearness, and with all the sting he could give them.

The squire had never dreamt whereto Jan's questions were tending, and could only stare at him.

“And iv you don't understand they names,” continued Jan, with greater coolness and deliberation, “I adds CHEAT and VILLAIN to 'em. Zquire Deverill, you baint worthy ov the name ov Red Indian!”

“What do you mean, you drunken lout?” said Deverill, with lordly contempt.

Jan laughed. “I mean, you be a Deverill, a word that ought to be spelt D-e-v-i-l! P'r'aps the Bible baint in your line; but there be a story in it 'bout a ewe lamb, and I zay to 'ee, ‘Thou art the man.’ You must ruin a young maid—a good, loven maid, and a maid that be now my wife—because you be Zquire Devil.”

Deverill laughed, but his mirth was forced. “Oh, it's about the girl, I see. What you have to complain of I don't see, my man. If she did have a little enjoyment before marriage you have her now, and I did not begrudge paying for my share. I gave you a first-rate situation.”

Jan was almost a murderer, but he controlled himself. "You thought you could buy me ; but you have a higher price to pay—Deverill." The name came from Jan's lips as though it defiled them, and the squire was well repaid for his insult of a moment before.

"I've had enough of this. I am not going to listen to you any longer."

"You'll go when I have done with 'ee. You make light ov it ; what would *you* veel like doen iv I had zpoiled your wife vor 'ee?"

"You idiot!" ejaculated the squire with profound contempt. "A wife of mine and you! Here, do not be a fool. The thing's done now and words won't mend it. If you like, I'll say I'm sorry the thing happened. See," pulling out his pocket-book, "here are two five-pound notes. Take them, and I'll write you out a cheque for a hundred, only don't let us have any more of this damned foolishness. You are too clever a fellow not to know that this style of thing won't do."

Jan looked at him for an instant ; then his features broke into a smile, and he held out his hand. The squire smiled too, congratulating himself on his happy thought. Jan's behaviour had so upset him that he had forgotten for the moment that every man of the "lower orders" has his price.

Jan took the notes, wrapped them round his

fingers, and, before the donor could guess his intention, struck him full on the mouth with his covered fist. Then he laughed grimly.

The Deverills had never been men to turn the cheek to the smiter, and the squire, for a moment, forgot all discretion and was about to throw himself on the yokel. But he corrected himself.

"Take yourself out of this wood instantly," he said, his voice thick with passion. "You shall pay for that, you lout, though I am not going to soil my fingers on your dirty carcase."

Jan laughed again. "You wished duels was in vashion agen. Well, they've got to be in vashion with you and me. It shall be swords, or pistols, or pitch-vorks. Ye Deverills have allus been vamous vor spoilen women and broken hearts. By God, it shall come to an end!"

The Deverill blood had never coursed through the veins of cowards, and the young squire had all the brute courage of his race. But he cursed himself for his "foolery," and wished himself well out of it.

"Gentlemen don't fight with their inferiors, but I'm half tempted to teach you a lesson you couldn't forget," he said with unsteady voice, his limbs quivering. "But get off my land, or I'll turn the dogs on you."

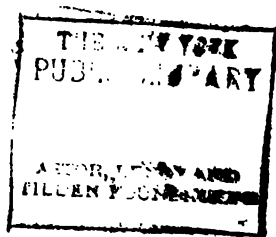
"Vine words won't save 'ee—Deverill." Again the name left his lips as though it were the



"The Squire answered nothing."

Jan Oxber]

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most loathsome thing in the world. "When you ruined a pore man's daughter and a pore man's wife you were lower than a pore man's dog. It be I that be loweren myself to offer to vight 'ee. Once more I tell 'ee, you be a coward."

The squire turned away, but Jan stepped before him again and stopped him. He raised his cane at this fresh insult, and Jan's eyes were full of mockery and contempt; but Deverill forbore to strike. "Iv I give way to my anger—Deverill," said Jan, "you would never leave thease wood alive. But it zhall be a vair vight atween we, though I ought to take 'ee as I would an adder. But you will have to vight. P'r'aps iv you goes hwome and sleeps on it you'll be a bit braver in the marnen. You may go," and Jan stepped aside contemptuously for him to pass.

The squire answered nothing, but glared at him in unquenchable hatred and passed on. Jan had no idea of the degradation he had inflicted on that arrogant young man. His contemptuous "You may go" was more bitter than death itself to his former master.

As it happened, an urchin, who was fishing in a pond near by, had heard part of the altercation and had seen the blow struck. He could not tell what it was about, but he ran home with the sensational story, and the country-side rang with

it before night. While admiring Jan, they greatly feared for him. To strike a squire was treason, or some crime equally great.

The next day the story reached the mill, and Pocock went to Jan in great distress. "Jan, my bwoy," he said, "be it true what Slacken have just told I?"

"What about?"

"'Bout the zquire."

Jan looked him calmly in the face. "Ees, it be, vather."

"Whatever be it all about?"

"How do Slacken know?"

"Jimmy Best's bwoy down to the cross-roads saw 'ee strike en, and it be told everywhere. What be the meanen ov it?"

"Well, I'll tell 'ee, vather. That devil that be called zquire insulted she as be my wife and your darter. And, as there be a God in heaven, he have to pay dearly vor it."

"Insulted my darter?"

"Ees, insulted her as iv she be the commonest woman in the world."

"Be that why you left up along?"

"It be."

"Look zee, my bwoy," said the miller with tears in his eyes, "thee should ha' told I avore. Do 'ee think I would ha' blamed 'ee vor striken ov en? My Ruth!"

"I wanted to spare 'ee, vather. But don't 'ee zay nothen avore Ruth ; it'll only put she out. We'll zay nothen avore she, vather."

"No, my bwoy," taking Jan's hand. "Look zee, iv that villain comes here I'll turn en out quick, iv it be with a gun. I've got thease place on a lease, and I don't care a rap vor en. My pore Ruth!"

"And now you know, vather ; and iv Ruth and me be troubled at times don't mind we. And mind thease, vather. When volks ask I what it be all about, I zhall zay he *tried* to insult my wife. Do 'ee zee?"

The miller took his hand again and wrung it, but could not speak.

"You'll be cheerful, vather, indoors, and make zo merry as you can, vor her sake."

"Ees, Jan. . . . My son."

All Jan's friends, when they saw him, were anxious to know all they could, but he gave them the answer he had prepared. "He came to the house when I was out worken and tried to insult my wife, and it reg'lar upset her and made her rough, just about. And I wouldn' take it vrom any man, and he have to answer vor it yet. They Deverills shall have the devil knocked out ov 'em."

"Jan, do 'ee be careful and think better ov it," said his friends aghast. They had supposed the

blow was struck in a fit of passion, and now they saw Jan Oxber, wheelwright, had deliberately pitted himself against Sir Sydney Deverill, by the grace of God squire and lord of the countryside. "Don't 'ee, Jan," they implored him, "the zquire can harm 'ee just about."

"Let the zquire try it then," said Jan. "I be a man with two good arms, and the zquire baint nothen mwore. Volks have been like rabbuts and hares with the zquire, and none dared zay he was a man, or a woman that she had a good name. But Jan Oxber or Zquire Deverill have to go under thease time."

Barleigh accepted Jan's account, and, in their own words, "trembled vor en." It was not until later that the gossips pieced together the different threads of the story and came upon the truth.

The squire had gone away again for some months—run away, Barleigh said—and Jan set himself to wait in patience for his return. As the days went on he became grimmer and grimmer, except in Ruth's presence, and none had the hardihood to question him again.

And Death came and crowned the edifice of affliction. He had so schooled himself that he believed no breath of the stern air he breathed came near his darling, and he fondly hoped that when the child was born she would become a

happy, blithesome woman again. He was more tender and loving than he had ever been ; he anticipated her slightest wants, and she in return smiled and caressed him. But she read his soul beneath the disguise. It was a tragic comedy of deception the two played on each other with heart's blood to sustain them, and, unguessed by Jan, Ruth was dying. When yet it was some weeks from the natural time she was in sore travail one Sunday night. Jan drove hard into Suckton for the doctor, whom he brought with him. The young life was beyond all human skill, and the doctor had to fight hard to save the mother. The miller and Miss Pocock—whom Jan had summoned on his way to the doctor's—were stunned almost to helplessness by the unexpected blow.

At noon the following day the doctor had to be summoned again, but he saw that his skill was now of no avail. Late in the afternoon Ruth sent for Jan, and, at her request, they were left alone together.

When Jan saw the pale, drawn face, and the weary smile, he cast himself down beside the bed and sobbed. It was the first time in his manhood that he had wept, and the tears were as drops of blood.

"John, my dear," she said feebly, putting her hand on his, "don't."

"Oh, Ruth, my darlen, you be very ill."

"My poor John, I am dying and I am glad to know it. No, John, hear me out. I'm very sorry for you, for you have loved me well, my dear, kind husband. And I love you. I always loved you. But when my sin had found me out I felt that I couldn't live and have *that* said of me always, even if I lived to be an old woman. It was more than I could bear, and it would have always been between us. I am going to leave you, John. I wish you could go with me. Kiss me."

"My darlen, it be my harsh words that have drove 'ee to this," he cried in anguish. "My darlen, live vor my sake. This child be dead and the past shall be buried with ut. I'll leave the zquire to his Maker, and I'll take 'ee var away vrom here where none shall know us. And we'll have little ones ov our own, please God, laughen bwoys and maids to cheer our hearts and drive away all sorrow. And you'll be the sweetest mother in England, with our little ones in your arms and on your breast. Never agen will I speak an angry word to 'ee, my darlen. Our trouble shall make our life mwore happy."

Ruth smiled happily and yet sadly. "It can't be, John, my dear. I shall have to leave you. God bless you, John. It is for the best, though it seems hard for you. We could never have

been really happy with that shadow between us. It is best for both, my dearest."

"And it be all my vault," Jan cried in his anguish. "God vorgive I iv He can!"

"No, John, it is all mine. You have nothing to reproach yourself with. It was my sin, and only a good man could have forgiven me. Tell me you freely forgive me, dear, and kiss me as you used to kiss me."

When Miss Pocock came in some time later she found Jan with his arms locked about his wife, and his lips on the death-damped forehead. She persuaded him to go away for a few minutes, not daring to tell him that the soul was about to take wing.

Half an hour later Jan was bereft of his wife.

Ruth was buried amid universal sympathy. So sudden had it all been that Jan's friends and neighbours in Barleigh learnt of the birth and death together, and were aghast at the news.

Many came unbidden to the funeral, and the church was filled. Jan was a mystery to all, and when the folks returned home they collected together with troubled countenances to discuss him. They had no doubt that he loved his wife, and yet he was the only one that stood about the coffin with dry eyes. His face was a shade paler than usual, and his mouth was shut like a vice. He spoke to no one, but received

the sincere but ill-expressed condolences of his friends with a grave nod. The next day he went about his work at the mill as usual.

"What be come over en?" his friends asked one another in perplexity, and while some feared that he was becoming heartless and callous, others feared that trouble had turned his brain.

The squire came home again, and directly Jan heard it he sent a note to him.

"Squire Deverill," it ran, "my wife be dead, killed by you. I will give you another chance to meet me man to man. You be a murderer now, and I ought to shoot you like vermin, but I'll give you one more chance.

"JAN OXBER."

The squire had been in many "tight corners," as he phrased it, but none had caused him a tithe of the anxiety that this had, and he often wished he had not been such a fool. When he received Jan's note, for the first time in his life fear clutched his heart. He read implacability in every word of it, and the next day he betook himself in secret to a friend's house, leaving his valet, who had acted as his confidant on more than one occasion, at the Hall, to report matters to him.

Jan often neglected his duties now, and took

to roaming the woods with a gun. The miller was long-suffering, and since Ruth's death all spirit seemed to have left him, but at last he thought it his duty to remonstrate.

"What be doen, Jan, all day?" he asked.

"Shooten."

"Thee brings nothen hwome."

"I shall one ov thease days, vather."

The miller looked at him, but Jan's countenance was inscrutable, and a half-formed suspicion died away again.

Jan did not know the squire was away, and, believing that he was keeping out of his way, he came to the determination that if he saw nothing of him in the next two days he would beard him in the Hall itself. But before that the squire himself acted. His valet had kept him informed twice a day of Jan's movements, and his courage failed him when he heard of the gun. He spent a cruel night in considering how he should escape from his relentless enemy. He had almost decided to take a long Continental tour, when a brilliant idea struck him. The next afternoon he galloped over to the Hall, and for half an hour was closeted with his head game-keeper.

The next day, as Jan was walking through the Middle Wood, three keepers rushed upon him. "We've got 'ee now," said one; "thee's bin

poachen long enough." He gave himself up quietly; he had no quarrel with them, but he asked one of them scornfully, "Where be the game then, iv I be poachen?"

"I saw 'ee drop 'em the other side thik stile there," said Toms, a man with the instincts of a worm. "We've bin watchen 'ee, my bwoy."

"Zeen I drop somethen?" Jan asked in amazement.

"Ees," said Toms, and crossing the stile he presently returned holding up a hare and a couple of rabbits. "We've bin watchen, I tell 'ee."

Jan made no reply, but he looked at Toms, and the fellow slunk behind.

The squire dropped a hint to his brother magistrates that a certain notorious scoundrel, who had long made havoc on his game, had fallen into his keepers' hands at last, and when Jan was brought before them, Toms found no difficulty in swearing to a long catalogue of his enormities. Jan, who in spite of the miller's entreaties would have no one to defend him, asked scornfully if it were at all likely that he would go poaching in broad day-light, but he was lectured by the Bench for his insolent bearing, which, said the chairman, convinced them that he was a dangerous and depraved fellow. However, as this was his first proved offence they were disposed to be lenient, and would send

him to gaol for one month only, but if he were brought before them again he would not get off with less than six months.

Jan looked at Toms with a glance that sent a paralyzing fear through that craven heart. "Tell your master that this won't zave en," he said. "It be another thing he will have to answer vor. And I may have a word to zay to you, Mr. Toms, one day."

"We knowed what would come ov it when he set hisself agen the zquire," said Barleigh, which felt the blow as if it were the collective father of the prisoner. "What did the zquire do as made Jan zo daren agen en?" they began to ask one another, suspicion in the tone; and one day when Mrs. Dimont happened to come in from Odstow they stumbled upon the truth. In the solitude of the house and in whispers when man met man whom he could wholly trust, there were fierce murmurs and muttered oaths. But the fear and reverence of squiredom had been transmitted in the blood for long generations, and none dared to speak out what all felt.

Jan took his imprisonment calmly. It was mortal strife between him and the squire; it was only to be expected that a villain would strike with base and cowardly weapons, and he must take the chances of war. He did not look

upon himself as revengeful, but rather as a judge who was called upon to deal wild justice because there was no other redress.

He came out of gaol and went back to the mill. The miller was well-nigh heart-broken with the troubles that had fallen so thickly about him, and men noticed that in the wrinkles of the rotund face where Laughter long had lurked, Sorrow had now its lair. He had lost flesh, and a great weight of years had been added to him in a few months. It was not until the arrest that it dawned upon him the kind of game Jan had been hunting, and, though he trembled for the consequences, he could not blame his son—his son whom in those bitter days he had come to love with a father's affection.

"Well, vather," said Jan cheerfully when they met. "How be 'ee?"

The miller took his hand, and the tears ran down his cheeks, but he did not speak, and Jan's heart smote him as he looked into the sorrow-stricken eyes.

"I've been wishen, vather, that a man could bear all his troubles hisself, but it baint possible. But keep a good heart, do 'ee now, vather."

"Never mind I, my bwoy; I be gotten wold, do 'ee zee?"

As they sat at supper that evening Jan told him the whole story. Pocock's hand shook with

agitation, but there was a fire in his eye. "Why didn' 'ee shoot en, Jan, like a dog, as he be?"

"He deserved it, vather, but I couldn' do it. I'd ha' vought en vair, but I couldn' murder en."

"And now he be about to be married, my bwoy, and they be agwain to have vine doens at the Hall next month. And my Ruth do lie in the churchyard!"

"Married! Who to?"

"A maid up along. Christchurch, I hear she do live."

"It won't be a pleasant marriage morn vor 'em, vather," said Jan grimly. "I'll be careful, vather. I mustn' be shut up agen when thik marriage takes place. I did read the Bible down yonder a goodish bit 'bout the wicked vlourishen like a green bay tree. But we'll zee."

CHAPTER VI

THE miller's news was true. The squire was about to "settle down," and Jan gleaned all the information he could. Maud Pexworth was the only child of Lieutenant-General Sir Gerald and Lady Pexworth, who had lived at Wells House, near Christchurch, since the General's retirement from the army. Lady Pexworth was esteemed a devout woman, and had devoted herself to fashioning her husband and daughter—among others—according to her own pattern of godliness. Maud had been brought up very strictly, and Lady Pexworth spoke of her as a "good girl," which meant that she was obedient and surrendered her will and conscience to her mother's keeping. There were times, however, when she rebelled, but life was so very unpleasant at such times, and Lady Pexworth's pain was written so plainly on her face, that Maud soon yielded. She was not yet twenty, and to men who desired her she was the "Rose of Hampshire." Tall and slender and graceful, her face was matchless in its serene and saint-like beauty,

and Deverill, who met her at a garden-party at Christchurch Towers, swore to his friend, Lord Boscombe, who introduced them, that he had never seen such a fine girl. "By Gad! Boscombe," he said an hour later, "I'm done for this time. I'll marry her before the year is out."

"If you can," laughed Lord Boscombe.

"I'll bet you a thousand I do. I'll settle down. She's just the girl to tame me. Introduce me to the old gent. What's his foible?"

"Never mind the old chap," said Lord Boscombe. "*He* don't count. You must play up to the old lady. Try her with altar-cloths and somebody's sermons, and bottle up all naughty words. She's a pious Tartar, my boy; I for one can't stand her."

He was introduced, and charmed the General and his lady by his most winning manner, and before the party was over had accepted an invitation from Lady Pexworth to "honour their poor table" the following evening. Maud thought she had never met a more perfect and kindly gentleman, and he made great progress. A fortnight later he spoke to Lady Pexworth, and that good lady kissed her daughter as she told her of her great good fortune. "One of the most ancient families in the country, my dear, and he loves you devotedly. You are very fortunate."

Maud was pleased; if she did not love, she

liked him above all the men she knew. The fascination of his manners had imposed upon her, and, inexperienced as a child, she had enshrined him in the secret temple of her heart as a prince among men. Of his true character she knew no more than if she had been born deaf and dumb and blind, and what Lady Pexworth knew she did not communicate to her daughter. The girl measured him by the purity of her own soul, and, in her simple heart, she resolved that she would strive to be worthy of him.

Lady Pexworth was delighted, and when her husband diffidently hinted that the wooer was not spotless she was considerably hurt. Of course he had been a little wild, like all young fellows, but he was the very man she should have chosen for her dear child, whose happiness was her sole object—and much more of the same kind, until the General was reduced to silence. With the baronet Lady Pexworth was charmingly frank. "The dear child loves and reverences you, Sydney, and it would only distress her to tell her how wild you young men are before marriage;" and she smilingly tapped her future son-in-law on the arm. "She is young and inexperienced, and would not understand, you know; I think you had better say nothing."

"Oh, thank you," said Deverill, half-delighted, half-uneasy. He wished Maud to think well of

him, for he loved her, but the prospect of living up to a reputation of perfect goodness was hardly alluring. He did attempt, half-heartedly, to tell Maud that, like other young men, he had been no better than he should have been, but she supposed it modest self-depreciation and would not listen.

"You cannot make me believe it, Sydney dear," she said. "How can you look at me with those innocent eyes of yours and tell me so?"

"Whatever I have been, you will make a saint of me," he said, as he took her to him and kissed her. With Maud's face close to his, and no devil at his elbow, he really meant it. Cards and wine and women seemed vain things to him just then, with Maud's face close to his and her hand softly stroking his hair. The animal part of him was asleep for the time.

* * * * *

Jan set off for Christchurch to seek out the squire, who was then on a visit to the Pexworths. What he should do when he got there he did not know. Circumstances should decide, but he was grimly resolved that the squire should not escape him.

He put up at a little inn near Wells House, and questioned the landlady as to the General and his family. She was a rotund woman of fifty

and a born gossip, and Jan had no difficulty in obtaining information.

"Miss Maud, she is to be married, next Wednesday's a month, to a gentleman from down along. A pleasant gentleman, so they do say, but he's played his pranks in his time, I do believe. Anyway, he baint good enough for Miss Maud, one of the prettiest maids you ever see. And the goodness of that child—for child she be still! She takes a delight in doen good to the volks, and with a smile and a kind word that makes us bless her. But her mother! She do call herself a pious woman, and she do come round the village to see the volks; but, la! she be nothen but an old cat, with her lecturen, and interferen, and threatenen, and grumblen, and a look that would turn the milk sour. But Miss Maud be the loveliest lady and the best lady I ever see; and some of us, that know what she be and what she do when a pore body be in trouble, almost worships the ground she do tread on, I can tell 'ee."

"Then why be she gwain to marry thik man?"

"It be her mother's doens, la bless 'ee! Not but what he may settle down steady, but not good enough vor Miss Maud, everybody do say."

Jan took a walk by the river-side, and came to a decision. The next morning he went to Wells House and asked to see Miss Pexworth alone.

The maid made difficulties about admitting him, but Jan was firm, and, after some delay, he was shown into the morning-room.

Her radiant beauty, brightened just then by her lover's near presence, was unquestionable, and, with one look, Jan satisfied himself that purity and goodness were stamped upon the lovely face. A sob almost burst from him as he looked upon her. Ruth was as fair and as pure once.

Maud was always gracious and courteous to the lowliest and poorest. "She treats we as human beings," said the villagers ; "as if we was made of flesh and blood too."

"You wanted to see me, I believe," she said with a kindly smile.

"Ees, if you be Miss Pexworth," he said.

"That is my name," she said, with another pleasant smile. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"My name be Jan Oxber, miss, and I live down to Barleigh, in Darset, near Zquire Deverill's place. I have come vrom there to zee 'ee. You be gwain to marry Zquire Deverill, I've heard."

A proud and happy blush suffused her face as she drew herself up and answered, "Yes, I am going to marry Sir Sydney Deverill shortly." When Jan saw how great were her pride and

happiness he felt a great gush of pity for her, and his purpose almost failed him.

"My lady," he said earnestly, "don't 'ee marry en. You be vair and winsome to look upon as any lady I ever zeen, and you be a good young lady, the pore volks about do zay, and I can zee it in your vace ; else I wouldn' have troubled about 'ee. My lady, don't 'ee marry en iv you wish to be happy. He baint fit even to look upon 'ee. Zquire Deverill be nothen less than a devil."

She drew herself up in angry indignation, and her eyes blazed, and Jan groaned to think of the misery he had to inflict upon her.

"Oh, shame to you, Oxber, to speak that way. I cannot listen to you any more." And, with a further access of indignation, "How dare you speak so of him? Please go at once."

"But you must listen to me, miss, vor your own sake. The shame baint mine. Once more I dare to tell 'ee the man who wants to marry 'ee be a devil. Miss"—Jan's voice was unsteady—"a year ago I had a wife who was everything to I, vair and sweet to look upon as you be, and she do lie in the churchyard to hwome, dead ov a broken heart. And it was thik villain Zquire Deverill's doens."

Maud's face had the hue of death, and she sat down trembling. "You are not speaking the

truth," she said faintly, raising her hands as if the trouble were tangible and she could push it away from her.

"As there be a God who knows all hearts, I be tellen the honest truth," he said. "You must listen, miss, while I make my words good. God knows it baint a pleasant job vor me." Maud said nothing, but sat with her face in her hands, and Jan, with even voice but with deadly earnestness, told her the whole mournful story of his great happiness and its fearful wreck. "That was the doens ov Sir Sydney Deverill who has come to marry 'ee, miss. He be a nice gentleman to look at, I do know, and he can be as sweet and speak as vair as any man, and what I've told 'ee was the use he made ov his vine words and his vine manners. As I have told 'ee, I sought to meet en man to man, and he offered I money, and insulted the woman he had wronged; and when I sought en again he had I put away in gaol on a false charge. Oh, miss, can you marry en? Do 'ee think he will make you happy? Do 'ee think you could be happy if you be his wife when you have to think ov my wife, a good and loven maid and as vair as you be once, brought to shame and death? We loved one the other, how much I cannot tell 'ee, and he took her helpless and wrought his devil's will upon her. Will 'ee marry en, miss?

can 'ee marry en? I be zorry to make 'ee troubled, but vor your own sake I ask 'ee."

She had listened with her face buried in her hands, never once looking at him, and so she sat for some time after he had done. Then she rose up, such a look of anguish on her face that Jan cried out, "Oh, miss, I be zorry vor 'ee. I be zorry to have had to tell 'ee."

She motioned him into silence, and, calling all her inborn pride and courage to her aid, walked steadily across the room and rang the bell.

"Sit down there, Oxber, for a few minutes," she commanded, and Jan obeyed.

"Mr. Deverill is in the billiard-room, I believe, Jane," she said to the maid who answered the bell. "Ask him to come here to me, please."

"Are you feeling bad, ma'am?" asked the maid, with concern, as she saw her young mistress's face.

"No, Jane ; please go at once."

They awaited the baronet's coming in complete silence. It was some minutes before they heard his step. He came with a buoyant step, humming some gay air, and, flinging the door wide open as he came in, did not see Jan, who was half hidden by it.

"What is it, Maudie?" he began lightly, but his tone changed as soon as he saw her face.

"Why, you look pale. Has anything upset my darling?"

For answer she pointed to Jan. When she saw the squire's face as his eyes met Jan's she saw enough, and, with a smothered groan, supported herself by the table.

The squire stood staring at him as if fascinated until Maud had commanded herself sufficiently to speak. "This man," she said, "has come to me with a horrible story, Sydney. He says—he says that you ruined his wife, and that she died heart-broken, and after that you—— For the love of God, Sydney," in a quick, gasping voice, "tell me it is not true."

He glared at Jan with murderous hate, and then slowly turned to Maud. "Let me send the fellow away, my darling. He is a drunken lout, and has come here lying and whining to see what he can frighten you into giving him. Let me turn him out, and I will explain the whole lying business."

"One word—is it true?" she asked resolutely.

"My darling!" he cried, imploring, "let——"

"Oh, it is true, I see it is. Oh, Sydney, you have broken my heart, and destroyed my belief in mankind!" she cried with a wail.

He took a step forward, and would have taken her hand, but her eyes blazed and she motioned him off. When the ardent devotee comes to the

knowledge that his god is but common clay his anger is a consuming fire, and Maud was almost frenzied in her pitilessness. "How dare you, sir, seek to contaminate me further?" she cried with an accent of horror. "Every kiss and every caress"—she shuddered—"has been humiliation enough—more than I can bear. Oxber, ring the bell and then listen to my answer. I would rather die this moment, Oxber, than become the wife of Sir Sydney Deverill."

The squire looked at her beseechingly, but there was nothing but loathing in her eyes, and, half-maddened, he turned on Oxber. "You devil!" he muttered. It was the bitterest moment in his life. Maud was the first being he had loved. His parents had been nothing more to him than keepers of the purse from which his supplies had to be drawn by threats or cajolery; his horses and dogs were nothing but brutes that could be bought and sold. For the first time his heart had been awakened, and now, by the instrumentality of a common peasant, his affection was treated as a loathsome thing. Not only his pride but his love was wounded, and it was the very bitterness of hell. In the tempest that shook him his fingers twitched to take the yokel by the throat and crush out his life. If revenge is to make the enemy suffer pang for pang, Jan was amply revenged.

The maid answered the bell again. "Ask my father and mother to come here at once, Jane," said Maud.

Not a word was spoken while they were waiting, and it was a painful time for all three. The squire looked at his lost love in helpless wrath and pain, but she would not deign to look at him, but gazed steadily past him into the grounds.

Lady Pexworth entered the room in advance of her husband with the tender, angelic smile on her face that she always assumed when the baronet was present. "You wished—my dear, what is the matter?" when she saw Maud's face. "Sydney, is anything wrong? Gerald," turning to her husband, "do you know? What is it, Maud?" with an agitation that was almost ludicrous. Then, catching sight of Jan, "Who is that man? Oh, I know; a man of yours, Sydney. Something is wrong at Deverill. Dear! dear!"

"Matilda," said her husband, "let us hear first before you alarm yourself."

"I have sent for you," said Maud, looking into her father's eyes, "to tell you I loathe this man who was to be my husband. He is—— Tell him to leave the house, papa—he pollutes it!" she cried wildly.

"Maud, Maud," said her father gently, going up to her and placing his hand on her shoulder,

"calm yourself and tell me what is wrong. I am afraid you don't know what you are saying."

She took her father's hand and laughed wildly again. "You did not know what kind of a man I was about to marry, papa. There stands a man whose wife Sir Sydney Deverill ruined—she died of a broken heart and that man's life is wrecked. And when Oxber tried to bring him to account, he ran away from him, and had him imprisoned on a false charge. That is the kind of man who has dared to come here and dared to kiss me, papa. Send him away, please."

"Maud Maud!" cried Lady Pexworth in the agonised tone of a mother who has brought up children that have rebelled against her. Her cunningly-built *château en Espagne* was falling in ruins before her eyes. "Sydney dear," turning to the baronet, "take no notice—she is hysterical."

Deverill spoke at last. "This scoundrel has frightened her, Lady Pexworth, and she is overwrought."

"Yes, yes, let me take her to her room. Come, my darling, and I will send for Beere."

But the General raised his hand, and his wife saw that he had taken the leadership from her. "Deverill," he said, "what is this story? is it true?"

Maud went to the door. "While that man remains here, papa, I shall stay in my room. Oxber, I thank you for coming here. It has hurt me, but you have done right. I am very, very sorry for you." And she swept out with a regal step.

"Deverill," said the General again, "is this story true?"

"The fellow is lying, General ; she was not his wife at the time, and I knew nothing about him. It is really nothing to make a scene about. It was simply a country-girl affair—she threw herself in my way, and I was a fool. I was willing, and offered, to pay handsomely for my share in it. This man was always a damned firebrand in the village. He made a great stir over it for his own purpose, and treated me badly after what I had done, and offered to do, for the girl. I don't think I am being fairly treated ; you have been young yourself, General, and know how these things happen. I have been no worse than others."

The General's eyes blazed. "If you mean to insinuate, sir, that I was ever guilty of such damned villainy, you lie, sir, most damnably lie. You will oblige me by leaving here at once. The dog-cart shall be at the door in fifteen minutes."

"Gerald, Gerald," began his wife imploringly,

but the glance he gave her was enough to subdue her to silence.

The squire fairly lost control of himself. "If a younger man had given me the lie, sir, I would have knocked him down for it. Your age protects you."

"But it shall not," answered the General, the old bellicose fire flushing his cheek. "I am ready to answer for it at any time. And you presumed to come here and make love to my daughter! By Gad, sir, I can see this man's story is true, and I could horsewhip you!"

Jan stepped forward. "Iv you please, zur," he said to the General, "iv there be any vighthen, it be my right vurst. Zquire Deverill and me have to settle matters vurst."

The General glared at him. "You stand back, my man, and don't interfere."

"I baint interferen, zur, I simply be tellen 'ee I've got rights."

The squire left the room, and Lady Pexworth would have followed him, but the General spoke. "Matilda, you will not soil your lips by speaking to that scoundrel. Please go up to Maud."

Lady Pexworth left the room weeping, and the General followed her to order the dog-cart. When he returned, he eyed Jan sternly. "My man," he said, "follow me," and leading him into the library, again looked at him searchingly.

"Now," he said, "I want to hear the story from beginning to end. And nothing, mind, but the truth."

"I didn' come here to tell lies," said Jan proudly but sorrowfully. "It baint anythen to lie about."

"Go on, please, then."

Again Jan told his story without a shade of passion. The General did not encourage him by word or look, but sat in motionless silence until he had finished. Then he asked, "Why did you come here—to this house, I mean?"

"I had no thought ov comen here, zur, when I started. I come to seek en becos he'd run away, and I meant that he shouldn' escape even iv it was his wedden morn. I thought, do 'ee zee, zur, that anybody as married he 'ould be ov the zame zort, and zo I didn' care. But when I heard what a good young lady Miss Pexworth be, I felt zure that she didn' know what zort ov a man he be, and I would tell she."

"And what is going to be done now?"

"It depends on the zquire now, zur. Revenge is a very pore thing; it can't make things as iv they never had been,"—his voice broke for the moment. "But it ain't really revenge as I ha' been seeken. I meant to show en that, iv the law couldn' touch en vor his crime, he shouldn' go unpunished. Pore men's darters 'll

be zafer now vor en, zur, and I be content to let en go in peace. I be zorry for Miss Pexworth, but I should ha' been zorrier iv she had married en. Better vor she to die, zur, than marry Zquire Deverill. He'd have broken her heart in six months."

"He would not fight you, you say?"

"No, zur, I be only a work-faren man and he be Zquire Deverill, do 'ee zee, zur, and he told I zo, only not zo polite."

"And what are you going to do now, Oxber? I mean what work, what career?"

"Iv it baint too hard on my vather-in-law, zur, I shall go to zome voreign land—Australia or America."

"I think you will get on, Oxber—you would make a fine soldier—and some day, when time has cured you, you will marry again, I hope."

"No, zur, I be married to the dead. Oh, zur, I have felt zometimes as iv I could ha' cursed God because there be Zquire Deverills. She be as vair and tenderzome as Miss Pexworth herself, and vor she to marry with I was like a queen stoopen to a beggar. Beggen your pardon, they Deverills, time out ov mind, ha' been devils. When I was in gaol, zur, I read ovten about vorgiven enemies, and I zaid to myself, 'Ees, but it don't zay as vermin shouldn' be cleared out,' and they Deverills be nothen

better than vermin. The day be comen, zur, when work-faren volks will zee that zquires be only vlesh and blood. A pore man's darter has been vair game—it be comen to an end, zur. But don't 'ee mistake I, zur ; I don't mean to zay that all the rich be like they Deverills. Zome be worthy ov all honour—as I have known once mwore to-day."

The General sat regarding him for a minute or two and then rose. "Oxber," he said gravely, "I will shake hands with you, and I thank you. You have done me and my daughter a service to-day, and believe me when I say we are grateful. I am glad you recognize that all gentlefolks are not as the Deverills. If you think I can help you in any way at any time you must write or come to me. You must have some refreshment before you go."

"No, thank 'ee, zur. You be very kind, but I must be gwain. P'r'aps Zquire Deverill be waiten vor I. Good-bye, and thank 'ee, zur."

"Good-bye, Oxber. I hope to see you again some day."

CHAPTER VII

JAN had heard the noise of the dog-cart taking away the squire some ten minutes before he left the house, but he was not surprised, on nearing the gates, to find that it was drawn up under the trees. The groom was at the horse's head, and Sir Sydney Deverill had alighted and was leaning against a tree, idly flicking another with his whip. As Jan approached the squire stepped out and intercepted him, and they stood looking into each other's eyes. They were near enough for Jan to know that the squire had been fortifying himself with brandy.

"You dog! You dog!" snarled the baronet.
"You lying, fawning hound!"

Jan looked at him calmly. "I could gie 'ee they names back agen, Zquire Deverill, and mwore with 'em," said Jan, "but they wouldn' mean enough, and names won't mend matters. Zquire Deverill, I came here with a purpose in my mind that would have meant death to one ov we. But you can go in peace vor me now. You

have a life-time avore 'ee, I guess, vor you to learn and play the man in. You have known a bit what it be to suffer, and I be tryen to vorgive 'ee and let the past be past. Iv I killed 'ee I should only have done what was right. It be hard vor I to tell 'ee that I hope you may repent and be worthy of everybody's respect, but I do tell it 'ee. I be gwain, and I don't want ever to zee 'ee agen."

A violent oath burst from the squire. "You dog! You hound! You'll forgive me! you've done with me! But, you gaol-bird, I haven't done with you. I'll teach you your place is the dung-hill. You dirty scoundrel, how dared you bring your foul carcase here?" pointing in the direction of the house.

"I came becos you be deceiven another good woman, a woman that be too good vor you even to look upon as you be now. But I be gwain now, and I tell 'ee I don't want ever to zee 'ee agen," and Jan tried to avoid him and walk away, but the squire prevented it.

"Yes, you dog, with your damned impertinence you'd sneak off, I know, but you are not going just at present. I'll teach you to interfere with your betters; you shall beg for mercy on your knees," and flourishing the whip with both hands he brought it down viciously on Jan's head and shoulders. The lash curled round his

neck and across his face, leaving a thin red weal starting at the left ear and passing round the neck and across the face, a little below the eyes, to the left cheek. It wanted less than an inch of a complete circle.

Again Deverill struck, but Jan caught the descending lash in his hand and held it in spite of the squire's efforts to wrench it away.

"Zquire Deverill," Jan said, trying to speak calmly, "be mindful what you do. I be gwain in peace, I told 'ee; don't 'ee rouse I, vor God's sake. I want to vorget and vorgive the wrong you have done. Let I go."

But the squire was reckless of everything. His tongue was set on fire of hell, and a devilish sneer distorted his face and vibrated in his voice. "Forgive the wrong I did! What wrong could I do a wench of that sort? I was a blasted fool to lower myself to her level, if that's what you mean. She was as common as the road before I had anything to do with her—it was a conspiracy against me I've seen since. By Gad! what a fool I was. She——" and an epithet left his lips that sealed his doom.

Jan's face paled, a shudder shook him and shook all pity and mercy out of his heart. He took off his coat, heeding not Deverill's laugh of derision, and struck his enemy lightly on the mouth.

But now the General's groom tried to interfere. "This won't do," he said; "don't you vight. Don't you go vighten, zur," to the squire.

"Don't 'ee interfere, but go away," said Jan, and the baronet told him where to go.

"Now, you dog," said the squire, and taking the whip by the tip he struck Jan a heavy blow with the handle. The groom did not wait to see more, but turned the dog-cart round and drove at full speed back to Wells House.

The blow from the heavy whip handle fell on Jan's cap, but it almost stunned him, and as the squire rained blow after blow with devilish ferocity he was too dazed to do more than hold his hands above his head to protect it. His arms were bruised and battered, and one blow falling on the little finger of his left hand broke it. Deverill laughed. "I'll teach you, you dog, to interfere with your betters."

With an effort Jan recovered himself, and, waiting his opportunity, caught the whip as it descended, wrenched it from the squire's hand, and, throwing his arms around him, closed in a deadly wrestle.

It was as fierce and sustained as the combat of wild bulls when they strive for the mastery and leadership of the herd, and for some time a slight advantage lay with Deverill. He fought and struggled with the superhuman activity of a

demoniac in a fit of frenzy, and Jan, who had been somewhat weakened by the blows he had received, and who was, moreover, suffering agonies from his tortured finger, had at times as much as he could manage to hold the squire in his grasp. Not a word was spoken as they twisted and tumbled ; now trying to throw each other against a tree and generally falling against it together ; now, gaining a momentary advantage, dealing the other a blow and instantly closing in the grapple again. It was a hard struggle, but Jan never doubted the result. He had to avenge, whatever the consequences might be, that last unspeakable insult to the dead woman whom he loved.

There were spectators now. The woman at the lodge and her grown-up daughter had hastened out at the noise of the fray, and were now standing a little distance away, and, with pale and terrified faces, were screaming "murder !" and a younger daughter, at her mother's bidding, had run into the village to bring the police. An old labourer had hurried up at the cries, but he was too feeble to interfere, though he tried to separate them by shouting that " the polis be comen up quick."

The squire was gasping for breath now, but his fury was not abated, and the struggle was as terrific as ever. Their clothes were torn, their

bodies bruised, and their faces were bleeding and mauled past recognition. Jan's left eye was swollen and bleeding, the squire's upper lip was split open.

The noise of wheels was heard, and the dog-cart came in view again, the General driving, and three of his men seated behind him. Both the combatants caught a glimpse of the General's stern face, and recognized that there were only a few minutes left them. "You devil!" cried Deverill, "you shan't escape if all the old fools in England come to help you," and summoning all his strength to one last desperate effort, he tried to dash Jan's head against a tree. It all but succeeded, but Jan managed to bend his head sideways as he was flung, and his back and shoulder met the tree with a shock that sickened him for a moment. But it was only for a moment. He steadied himself, and with a supreme effort lifted his enemy, whose muscles were relaxing, from his feet and tried to fling him from him. The squire fell backwards with Jan on top of him. His back doubled under him as he came down, and he uttered a horrible scream and lay still. Jan freed himself and rolled by his side, and, for the first time in his life, fainted.

When he recovered consciousness a few minutes later he found a small crowd around, which included a policeman. The squire lay as he had

fallen, and they were bathing his forehead with water and wiping the blood from his face. Jan staggered to his feet, and mechanically began to put on his coat. They had washed the blood from his face as he lay unconscious, but it was still almost unrecognizable.

The General came up to him and took him on one side. "Oxber," he said gravely, "this is a bad business. I have sent my man for the doctor. I am afraid—of the worst."

"It be a bad business, zur, and though it be none ov my zeeken, I don't veel zorry vor it."

"Don't say anything more now. I may have to repeat what passes between us, and my man has told me a good deal of the way it began. Sit down while you wait."

They waited in silence until the dog-cart drove up furiously with the doctor. He had a few whispered words with the General, and then knelt down and began to examine Deverill.

The squire lay motionless, his eyes closed, and his face ghastly white, but he breathed heavily, and low moans broke from him. The doctor touched his back and he screamed. "Stand back, all of you," said the doctor; and, his order being complied with, he called the General to him. "It is a sad business, General," he said. "I don't think it will prove fatal; I hope not, at any rate. But I doubt whether he will ever

walk again. The spine is injured. He must be taken to the lodge there, and I must have Jelton down from Southampton for a consultation. It is very sad ; such a fine young fellow ! ”

The General called Mrs. Lear to him and sent her to prepare a room for the patient. The groom was sent to the surgery for a stretcher, and, after a painful scene, the patient was put upon it and carried into the cottage.

Jan remained where he was, and, after Deverill had been removed, the General came to him again. “ Oxber, this is very serious, I must tell you,” he said. “ He is in a very critical state.”

“ Zo I understand, zur.”

“ The constable here will have to take you into custody. You will be brought before the magistrates—I shall be one—on Thursday morning, and I shall do what I can for you. I know how it began and the provocation you received. I hope he will be out of danger by Thursday for your sake, but if things turn out badly I shall send you a solicitor. And now come with me ; the doctor shall see to your hurts, and then you must go with the constable.”

“ Thank ’ee, zur,” said Jan, looking him full in the face ; “ you’ve been very kind to I.”

“ That will do,” said the General curtly ; “ I owe you something still.”

Sir Sydney Deverill passed a very bad night,

and Dr. Beere did not leave his bedside. He had recovered full consciousness, and the sick room the whole night long was full of groans and foul language. The next day Dr. Beere did not speak of him as a "fine young fellow."

The distinguished specialist from Southampton, Dr. Jelton, arrived in the course of the morning, and, after a careful examination of the patient, he confirmed the opinion of Dr. Beere. Unless fever supervened there was no danger to life, but the spine was seriously injured, and, in all probability, Sir Sydney Deverill would never walk again.

Dr. Beere broke the news to his patient as gently as he could, and implored him, for the honour of his race, to accept his fate like a brave gentleman. But he appealed in vain. "Not walk again? What good are you and the other blasted fool then?" he cried. So violent was his language that the doctor lost all patience and threatened to withdraw from the case if he could not behave himself.

"Why didn't I shoot that gaol-bird, doctor? What a fool I was! I had a revolver, but I left it in the cart and couldn't get at it. If they'll only hang the fellow I don't care," and again he broke into profanity that was only stopped by a sleeping draught which the doctor administered.

General Pexworth had seen to Jan's comfort

in the lock-up, and had Dr. Jelton's report conveyed to him. He was taken before the magistrates the next morning, and well it was for him that he had a friend on the Bench. The worthy Justices were aghast with horror when they heard of the occurrence. A yokel dare to lay hands on a squire, who belonged to one of the most ancient families in the South! What was the country coming to? And the General, who told them no more of the story than he could help, had to threaten and entreat and cajole before they would listen to reason.

After the evidence of the groom and Mrs. Lear, the most mule-headed man among them could not fail to see that the squire was the aggressor, but they were determined to punish the yokel for his audacity, and proposed remanding him, without bail, until the Squire should feel disposed to come to court. It was not until the General had pointed out that, as the Squire was the aggressor, he would have to be taken in custody and placed in the dock, that they could be persuaded to deal with the case summarily. That was one victory for the General, and it was another when he showed them that all they could do was to bind Jan over to keep the peace. What was the country coming to, they asked again, if such a spirit were allowed to exist unchecked among the yokels? It boded the downfall of the country ;

and the chairman, for a quarter of an hour, lectured Jan in a speech that contained more invective than logic or justice. No provocation could justify a common man laying hands on a gentleman, and in better times, now gone by, the rope would have been his portion. He had maimed a gentleman for life—it was horrible—and he deserved transportation for life, with frequent administrations of the lash. He was a pest to society, a rogue that justice would yet have by the heels. And then, by way of peroration to the flight of eloquence, his worship bound the scoundrel over in two sureties of twenty pounds each to keep the peace for twelve months. Deverill was a howling maniac when he heard the result.

Jan bade the General good-bye again, and set off home, not knowing that the news had preceded him. Deverill's valet had been sent on to the Hall the morning after the fight. His master was dying—dead by now, he expected—murdered by Jan Oxber, and in less than an hour the news had spread from the Hall all over the estate, and lay like a cloud of horror over Barleigh. Late that night it was told that the squire was terribly injured, but likely to live. It lifted the cloud a little from the village, but it would probably mean transportation for life for Jan, they believed. But the fact that Jan had dared so

much and come off victor filled them with unspeakable awe. The great idol of squiredom, that had dominated their lives and the lives of their forefathers, had been struck at its base and was toppling over, and, for the first time, they realized that it was but an idol. Mr. Cranton went round the village with uplifted hands of horror. It was what he had foretold; it was only to be expected from a man that had set him at defiance. It was a terrible warning to all of them, and so forth. For once the folks were pleased to have a visit from their vicar, hoping he would be able to tell them what Jan's fate would be. But they were disappointed. Mr. Cranton did not know, but he hoped an example would be made of him.

Jan passed through Barleigh, on his way home, about seven o'clock on the evening of his release. As he came up the village street his appearance created consternation. Under the most favourable circumstances they expected that he would be languishing in gaol, and, for a moment, those that saw him approaching were dumbfounded. Then the cry was raised, "Here be Jan Oxber coming!" and men and women came running out into the street.

"Baint 'ee in prison then, my bwoy?" asked one, and no one laughed at the ludicrousness of the question.

"No, I be here."

With a glad shout they tried all at once to shake his hand.

"Baint it true, Jan?" they cried; "didn' 'ee nearly kill the zquire?"

"We had a vight," said Jan, gravely, "and it was feared he would die. But the doctor do zay that Zquire Deverill be never like to walk again. His back be hurted."

"Jan, it can't be true! Why bisn' 'ee in gaol then?"

"I had a vriend there, and he spoke vor I to the other magistrates, and I be bound over to kip the peace vor a yer."

"Be that all? Jan, tell we the truth."

"That be all iv he do live."

Then they must all shake hands with him again, and half a dozen times he had to repeat that he was speaking the truth.

"Tell we all about it, Jan, do 'ee now."

"Do vather know about it?" he asked.

"Ees, he do, and he do take it hard, my bwoy," said Garrett. "I zeen he thease marnen, and I tried to cheer en."

"Then I must be gwain, but I'll zay a vew words to 'ee," and he stood on Dyke's garden wall and spoke.

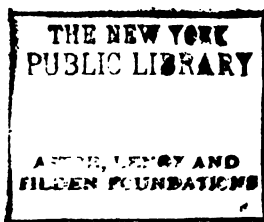
"I've no need to tell 'ee, my vriends," he said, "the cause ov it all. But I couldn' let en,



"They tried all at once to shake his hand."

Jan Oxber]

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Zquire Deverill as he be, go on his way thinken that the pore had only rights and veelens to be trampled on. When I heard that he was gwain to marry, I went to zeek en, but I heard what a good and beautiful maid he be about to marry, and I went to the house and told she all. She be a real good young lady, and it upset she just about, and she called en in to where we was, and told en that she would die avore she'd marry en. And her vather—a gentleman he be—when he heard what it was about, told en to leave the house at once, and he had to go. He went out avore I, but he waited vor I, and began abusen me. I told en he could go in peace vor me now, but he struck I with his whip here." Jan pointed to the still livid weal. "And the devil, that be the vurst vorevather ov they Deverills, put it in his head to insult my dead wife. There couldn' be vorgiveness vor en avter that, and we vought it out. Zquire Deverill, he vought with his whip handle and broke thease vinger, till I took it vrom en. He be a strong man, and the devil helped en, and it was a hard vight. But his back be injured, and he'll never walk agen, the doctor do zay.

"My vriends, Zquire Deverill will never bring shame on a woman agen. I told 'ee once it be Zquire Deverill agen Jan Oxber, man to man; and it be Zquire Deverill that have gone under. I didn' do it becos I wanted to be revenged on

en. No revenge would give she I loved back agen, but I meant to show en that the pore had rights that money couldn' buy. They Deverills have allus thought they could shame women and play all manner ov devil-tricks iv they chucked a shillen or two to 'em avter it was over. One ov 'em knows different now.

"My vriends, zome ov we have worshipped zquires as iv God made 'em out ov the best garden-mould, and we out ov road-scrapens. But, and I hope ye'll remember it—it baint zo voolish as it do look—zquires be only vlesh and blood the zame as we, and, ov the two, our blood be a better colour. Treat the zquire with respect, but learn to look on en as a man and not next door to a god. Our zouls and bodies belong to no man.

"I hope ye'll all think about it when I be gone. I be gwain away as zoon as I can, but I want 'ee to be men, and stand up vor men's rights. We do work, and it do make the zquires richer, and there be the pore-house vor we when our backs be bent, and our hair be grey. Do 'ee think it be right, and the Almighty meant it zo? I tell 'ee it baint; iv a man will work he ought never to know an empty belly. I thank 'ee all, and God bless 'ee."

"God bless thee, Jan!" cried an old woman; "we'll stand up vor our rights, never veer."

In the flush of excitement and enthusiasm there were many that cried the same. They begged him to stop and make good cheer with them, but he pleaded the anxiety of his father-in-law, and hastened on to the mill.

The miller was standing in the porch, looking out into the mill-yard with eyes full of trouble. His pipe, from sheer habit, was in his mouth, but it was unlighted; tobacco could not give its old solace. It was more than his bewildered mind could comprehend for the moment, when Jan stood before him and said, "How be, vather?"

"Jan! Bist come hwome, Jan?" he asked at last.

"Don't it look like I, vather?" asked Jan cheerfully.

"Baint it true, my bwoy?"

"Ees, it be true, vather. Zquire baint goen to die just yet, but he will bring no more shame on women, vather. Zo long as he do live he'll be zo helpless as a baby."

The miller broke down, and Jan laid his hand gently on his shoulder. "Come along in, vather, and I will tell 'ee all about it. I have zeen the wicked vlourishen; ye know how the rest do run, vather."

"Ah, Jan, my bwoy, but it can't gie we back the dead," said Pocock with a sob as he sat down.

"No, vather, but we can go to the dead, and the dead be at rest, thank God. Don't 'ee grieve, vather," said Jan, tenderly, laying his hand on the old man's arm; but without warning, Jan broke down himself, and great sobs shook him. It was the reaction from the physical and mental strain he had undergone, and was so violent and long-continued that it fell to the miller to try to comfort and soothe him. At last he became calmer, and for a long time they sat in silence, gazing into the fire. Jan was nerving himself to a hard task, but it was not until after supper that he felt able to begin.

"Vather," he said, "iv I must keep my reason, I must go away. I think ov gwain to Australia zo soon as can be."

"Oh, Jan, my bwoy," said the miller in agonized entreaty, "don't 'ee gwo and leave I. I've zeen it comen, my bwoy; I knowed 'ee'd tell I that thease night, but don't 'ee go just yet. Look zee, my bwoy, I be a wold man now, and it won't be very long vor 'ee to wait. I ha' nobody but thee, Jan, and it won't be long."

"That'll do, vather," cried Jan, with difficulty controlling himself. "Don't 'ee zay another word never agen. While you live, I stay with 'ee."

* * * * *

Squire Deverill was brought back to the Hall

a week later. The greatest celebrities in the medical profession were summoned one after another to Deverill, but there was only one opinion among them—he would never walk again.

Deverill had confidently expected that these great men from town would report differently from the “country idiots who know nothing,” and when one after another told him that he was incurable, he suffered a terrible shock. At the worst, he had been expecting that after a little time he would be able to get about again, a little lame perhaps, but still nothing that would interfere with his pleasures ; and he did not give up hope until he had been examined by them all. Then, for the first time, he had to face the fate of a life-long invalid, tied to his bed or chair through all the weary years. He brooded over it until he was almost a madman, and for a time he drank so heavily that he came very near cutting short the life whose horrors he was continually picturing.

He was taken out daily for a short time in a bath-chair, but the dulness of his life was unendurable torture. His friends, after one or two visits, kept away, finding his irritable and insulting temper intolerable, and books had never been more than mere paper and ink to him. He endured it for a few weeks, and then was taken to London, and the Hall was let to a Bristol sugar-refiner. Other amusements being denied him,

he found solace in gambling, which soon became his master-passion. But after a time London palled on him, and he was taken abroad. In Paris, and the fashionable gambling resorts of the last generation, stories are told of the "terrible invalid Englishman" to this day. He lived the last few years of his life with a ballet-dancer, and died, after an orgie, at the age of thirty-seven. His body was brought to Deverill, and he rests with his fathers, a son not unworthy of that honour. His cousin, a lieutenant in the Navy, succeeded to a heavily-burdened inheritance, and for some years was glad to leave the Hall in the tenancy of the sugar-refiner, and follow his profession in order to give the estate time to recover. He felt so hurt that he swore he would not spend a penny piece, if he could help it, on the obsequies of his cousin, and that is why no memorial tablet records the virtues of Sir Sydney Deverill in the church at Deverill.

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Jan saw with concern that the miller's words were true. He had aged greatly, and it was plainly evident that he was fast breaking up. He still worked, but at times his mind failed him, and Jan took all the burden of the business on his own shoulders.

During the winter the old man gradually declined, and, in spite of Jan's entreaties that he

would take things easy, he persisted in trying to work.

"Thee bist only a beginner, my bwoy," he would say, "and I must zee things don't go wrong."

But at last he was unable to get out of doors, and as the gloom of winter gave way before the rising glory of spring he fell into second childhood and became so feeble that he could not leave his bed. It was a painful time for Jan, for the old man's mind had gone back to the days when his daughter was a merry, laughing maiden, and then he would forget who Jan was, and would tell him that Ruth was a "vine maid, and would have a goodish lump of money to take to the man that caught her vancy." Never once did the tragedy of the later days come within the horizon of his dotage; and, though his babbling was as knife-stabs to Jan, he was thankful that the old man passed to his death through the peaceful waters of Oblivion.

His will directed that four hundred pounds should be paid to his sister at Odstow, and that Jan should have the remainder, which amounted, when all was settled, to about seven hundred pounds. With that sum in his pocket, Jan bade good-bye to his friends, and set out for Australia.

* * * * *

Jan Oxber was not the kind of man, as the

reader will have seen, to wait with folded arms until Fortune came his way. He was a young man in a young country; he had drunk of the waters of Marah in his youth, and he was a son of the people in the land of Democracy. It was years before anything was heard of him in Barleigh. The first news came through a freed convict, who wrote to his friends in Suckton that Jan was a prosperous sheep-farmer and a man of wide influence in the colony. The ex-convict informed his friends of the tremendous size of Jan's sheep-run and of the great flocks he owned, which seemed so impossible to Barleigh that, with one accord, it condemned the man as a liar. "Why, Australy be only a island," said some, "and there wouldn' be veed vor zo many ship as he do zay Jan do have."

But shortly afterwards Jan wrote to Barleigh to tell his friends how he had prospered, and offered, if any of the villagers cared to come out, to pay their passage and find them employment. So alluring was the prospect of a land where abundance reigned that eleven young men and three married couples braved the dangers of that world's-end voyage, and after that Barleigh was never without news of Jan.

Steadily he rose in wealth and influence, and the constituency in which he lived, with an unanimity that was superior to party, invited him to

become its member. It was some years before I discovered Barleigh that he died, while holding the office of Minister of Finance, the most respected man in the colony. The village Hampden had become the Hampden of a larger field, and, until his latest breath, was ever in the forefront of the struggle for liberty.

Barleigh never saw his face again, but he had left his name and something of his spirit. "Jan Oxber's time" was worthy of being a signpost on the highway of life to the Barleigh peasants. For almost the first time they had been taught that they had rights as men that only dastards dare not claim. Jan Oxber's struggle was some of the earlier leaven that shall yet increase and multiply until rural England is no longer merely the peasant's working-place but the peasant's home.

WILLIAM L. GIBBS,
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